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## Urgent action needed over Sumatran peat forest logging

Last Updated: 12:01am BST 20/10/2008

### Ian Wood reports on the loss of vitally important swamp forests in Sumatra

Sumatra has had more than its fair share of natural disasters over the last decade including the 2004 tsunami that killed over 190,000 people in the northern province of Aceh.

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Now a man made disaster is threatening to add to the misery that this region has endured.

The Tripa area of peat swamp forest is being logged to make way for new palm oil plantations and the effects will have dire consequences for the people and wildlife that live there.

The Tripa forests are located in north western Sumatra and provided effective coastal protection for communities in the tsunami. Behind them, very few casualties were recorded and they also serve to protect against floods as the peat swamp regulates water flow.

Their importance for both biodiversity and carbon stores cannot be over stated.

They are home to one of just six remaining viable populations of the critically endangered Sumatran orangutan and contain millions of tons of carbon dioxide that is being released into the atmosphere as they are destroyed.

A recent study commissioned by the Swiss NGO PanEco has shown the peat is more than 3 metres deep over much of the area.

There are already laws in Indonesia that forbid the destruction of peat more than 3 metres deep but the local government seem powerless to protect this area.

The effects are threefold.

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Sumatran orangutan (top) and areas of Tripa peat forest that has already been logged

- 1) CO2 is released into the atmosphere as the larger trees are cut and the remaining land is burnt.
- 2) Subsequent drainage causes further degradation of the peat releasing even more CO2.
- 3) This then results in subsidence of the land itself of approx 5 cm per year. The area of Tripa is already at about sea level, or only slightly above, so within a very short space of time the sea will claim huge swathes of this region and inland communities will have no protection against future tsunamis.

The recent agreement to protect forests in

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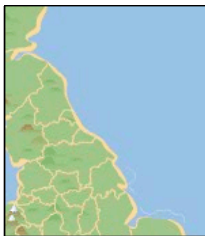
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Sumatra between the Indonesian government and a number of conservation groups including WWF and Fauna and Flora International is a step in the right direction. However to save Tripa from the unfolding disaster there needs to be urgent action immediately.

Irwandi Yusuf, the governor of Aceh called for a moratorium on all logging in Aceh in June 2007 but it is being largely ignored on the ground.

Pak Adnan, one of four of Aceh's Senators agreed to meet me in Tripa and together we witnessed scenes of total devastation. His concern seemed genuine as he explained the problems this region is facing.

"I have not seen any goodwill from central government to act to protect Tripa. Already I have discussed it with the executive but they have not taken any action" Pak Adnan told me.

"If necessary it must come from the President himself who has the power to stop the destruction of Tripa. The status of Tripa must be raised to that of protected forest and then it will be immortal forever. To achieve this it needs continued pressure from both local people and the international community.

"In my heart I believe the ecosystem of Tripa must be saved, it's vital. The most important problem is the palm oil concessions on areas of peat forest. It needs a firm statement from central government and an urgent review of these existing concessions." he said.

There are five palm oil concessions that have been granted by the Indonesian central government with leases that expire in 2020. Such is the scale of logging here that the remaining tracts of forest will be long gone before then.

"Local people do not destroy the peat swamp forest as they do not have access to heavy machines but the palm oil companies have vast amounts of money," Pak Adnan told me.

"For local people we can create better sustainable sources of income such as fish breeding and livestock that fit in with the ecosystem. We could also create ecotourism opportunities and then at last the people that live in Tripa could have income from both palm oil and these other sources."

Surely this is preferable to increasing vulnerability to rising sea levels, which threatens not only communities and their livelihoods, but also the very palm oil estates themselves in the long run.

The palm oil company PT Astra Agro Lestari who are one of the main suppliers to Unilever, are running one of the legal concessions in Tripa. It covers nearly 13,000 hectares of which around 6000 hectares is still virgin rain forest, all located on peat swamp with an average depth of about 3m but reaching over 5m in places.

Unilever announced last month that they have committed to only purchasing 100 per cent sustainably produced palm oil by 2015. However, by then this important area of forest will have already been lost forever.

Regina Frey, president of PanEco, a conservation groups which campaigns for the sustainable use of natural resources in Indonesia, said: "I call on Unilever to take action to help to save these last areas of Sumatran peat swamp forest. If they refuse to buy oil palm from this concession it would send out a firm message to PT Astra Agro Lestari to stop logging primary peat forests for palm oil, thereby damaging the image of the palm oil industry"

After cutting the larger trees in the peat swamp forest the remaining trees are set on fire. The palm oil companies then cut drainage canals across the site as the land is too wet for oil palm cultivation. The peat then starts to subside as it dries out and results in very poor conditions for palm oil trees to grow in.

We saw lots of palm oil trees that are now falling over and will be useless as future crops. When the peat has degraded and subsided to below sea level the whole area will be flooded with seawater and nothing will grow here again. There is also proof that the surrounding areas of non peat swamp provide far better conditions for palm oil.

"There is plenty of non-forested land on mineral soil in the surroundings of Tripa which is available and produces excellent conditions for oil palm cultivation. In fact some of the highest palm oil yields in the world are recorded in that region. Consequently the Tripa concessions could be relocated there." said Regina Frey.

The simple truth is that the palm oil companies want to sell the timber from the large trees they fell when they clear the land. In fact there are vast areas of already cleared land in Tripa that have not even been planted with palm oil.

Now is the time for action not words here in Tripa. To destroy one of the last great areas of peat swamp forest in Sumatra is an act of criminal vandalism. Along with orangutans these forests also contain two other rare ape species, the Siamang and the White Handed Gibbon along with Sumatran tigers, clouded leopards and sun bears.

Conflicts have developed between villagers and the palm oil companies. Such is the

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sensitivity that PT Astra Agro Lestari's concession is now guarded by the Indonesian police and army.

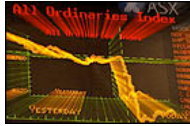
I managed to get into the village of Pulo Kruet where I met one of the leaders of the community. He told me that the palm oil companies are now taking the land that belongs to his village and they are powerless to prevent it.

We walked for several kilometres together through the palm oil plantations that now surround his home. Eventually we arrived at the border of the remaining forest and saw freshly made orangutan nests in the trees right on the edge of the destruction.

Here in Tripa the fight to save this critically endangered species is one with far reaching consequences for the human population.

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