

The borneo rainforest



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The Borneo Rainforest is located in Borneo which is the third largest island in the world and is located north of Java, Indonesia, at the geographic centre of Maritime Southeast Asia. The Rainforest is 130 million years old, which makes it the oldest rainforest in the world. The Borneo rainforest is one of the only remaining natural habitats for the endangered Bornean Orangutan. It is an important refuge for many endemic forest species, including the Asian Elephant, the Sumatran Rhinoceros, the Bornean Clouded Leopard, the Hose's Civet and the Dayak Fruit Bat.

The Borneo lowland rain forests cover most of the island, with an area of 427, 500 square kilometers. The Borneo mountain rainforests lie in the central highlands of the island, above the 1, 000 meters elevation. There are species of birds found in the forest and 13 mammals. Tourism is also a popular thing in the Rainforest, with resorts and tours available. In the 1980s and 1990s Borneo underwent a remarkable transition. Its forests were levelled at a rate unparalleled in human history.

Borneo's rainforests went to industrialized countries like Japan and the United States in the form of garden furniture, paper pulp and chopsticks. Initially most of the timber was taken from the Malaysian part of the island in the northern states of Sabah and Sarawak. Later forests in the southern part of Borneo, an area belonging to Indonesia and known as Kalimantan, became the primary source for tropical timber. Today the forests of Borneo are but a shadow of those of legend and those that remain are highly threatened by the emerging biofuels market, specifically, oil palm.

Oil palm is the most productive oil seed in the world. A single hectare of oil palm may yield 5, 000 kilograms of crude oil, or nearly 6, 000 liters of crude,

making the crop remarkably profitable when grown in large plantations, one study that looked at 10, 000 hectare-plantations suggests an internal rate of return of 26 percent annually. As such, vast swathes of land are being converted for oil palm plantations. Oil palm cultivation has expanded in Indonesia from 600, 000 hectares in 1985 to more than 6 million hectares by early 2007, and was expected to reach 10 million hectares by 2010.

Despite this outlook, there has recently been some positive conservation news out of Borneo. In February 2007, the governments of Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia agreed to protect roughly 220, 000 square kilometers of tropical forest in the so-called " Heart of Borneo". Environmental group WWF was particularly active in the establishment of the protected area. WWF says there are four big threats to Borneo's forests: land conversion, illegal logging, poor forest management, and forest fires.

It adds that large-scale industrial projects (roads, and hydroelectric projects like the Bakun dam) and hunting are also threats, but to a lesser degree. A further issue is the climate of corruption, which permeates virtually all levels of government in Kalimantan. Forestry decisions are now made at the district level, where officials are said to be sometimes easily swayed by money. A strategically gifted motorbike can often win influence at the village level. A fundamental problem is that development in Borneo is driven by extractive industries at present there are few economic alternatives.

These industries are rarely sustainable, especially when little is invested in long-term management of resources. The causes of deforestation in Borneo are not complex; the solutions are. After large-scale deforestation in the lowlands and the importation of millions of people through poorly-executed

transmigration programs, there are few economic options in most of Borneo. Having lost jobs in the forestry sector, many villages are faced with having to decide whether to give up the remaining forest for oil palm or continue with subsistence living.

Oil palm plantations certainly offer economic potential, especially when they are planted on already deforested and degraded lands, but it makes little sense to establish them on increasingly scarce areas of natural forest. Social safeguards are also required to ensure labour abuse and sharecropping schemes are avoided. The Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) is one initiative working on equitable and sustainable palm oil production. Conservation is also an urgent priority in Borneo, especially in biologically diverse regions that have so far escaped the ravages of intensive logging and fires.

The recent "Heart of Borneo" initiative is a shining example of what's possible. However, it is absolutely critical that once protected areas are established, they are maintained. The history of "protected areas" in Kalimantan where large percentages of supposedly protected area was logged and distributed for development is disheartening, but now is the time to move beyond this and plan for a future where conserved areas are actually protected and sustainable use of buffer zones is maximized.

----- [1]. Borneo, 2012, accessed on 12/10/2012 at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borneo> [2]. Wildlife of Borneo, 2011, accessed on 12/10/2012 at http://www.mongabay.com/borneo/borneo_wildlife.html [3]. Borneo forest, 2011, accessed on the 16/10/12 at <http://www.google.com.au/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=>

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