Kalimantan's forests are doing OK: NGO

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THE JAKARTA POST/JAKARTA



Antara/Feri

Tree hugger: A firefighter tries to beat out a forest fire with a tree branch in Batu district, Riau Islands, on Thursday. The authorities have yet to determine the cause of the fire that destroyed 2 hectares of the 5-hectare protected forest.

The Heart of Borneo is doing well, despite the usual threats from extractive activities and fires, according to environmental activists.

The famed forested area spans 22 million hectares in Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia and Malaysia on Kalimantan Island, also known as Borneo.

Adam Tomasek, the leader of the Heart of Borneo Initiative, said on Thursday that deforestation and forest degradation remained a serious issue in Indonesia and Kalimantan.

"This is not at all to say that the threats from forest conversion, deforestation and forest degradation in the area have disappeared. They are still real threats," he told *The Jakarta Post* on Thursday.

In a recently released report, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Indonesia said that most types of forest in the Heart of Borneo were in good or very good condition, although several areas were under threat from businesses.

Illegal logging, an excessive rate of legal timber extraction, forest fires, mining and excessive wildlife hunting posed additional threats, the report said.

However, Tomasek said that political commitments to conserve and to develop the area in a sustainable way had been made over the past five years, such as by the issuance of Presidential Regulation No. 3/2012 on Spatial Planning in Kalimantan.

"It was the first time that the government developed a special plan for the whole of Kalimantan, and not just for one province or district. This was one spatial plan for the entire island," Tomasek said.

A working group comprising the Coordinating Economic Minister and the Agriculture, Defense, Environment, Foreign, Forestry, Home and Public Works Ministers was given a mandate to realize the Heart of Borneo Declaration, which Indonesia signed in 2007.

"With commitments at both the national and district level, we are starting to see that the issue of illegal logging in some parts, but not all parts, of the Heart of Borneo has disappeared," Tomasek said before adding a somber assessment.

"Without provincial and district engagement, I don't think we'll see much progress."

Under the spatial planning regulation signed on Jan. 5, the government will allocate 45 percent of Kalimantan to serve as the "lungs of the world".

Separately, Indonesian Environmental Forum (Wahli) executive director Berry Nahdian Furqon warned that the spatial regulation might trigger new conflicts due to its centralized approach.

"The government did not make a comprehensive study. Neither did it consult with the local people," Berry said, adding that regulation provided no specific information on the government's proposed spatial plans or conservation programs.

Moreover, Berry said, many conservation areas in Kalimantan were no longer forested areas. "Only forests in the Meratus mountains in South Kalimantan are still well conserved while the rest have overlapping land use with industrial activities, such as palm oil plantations and mining," he said.

Tomasek said the report analyzed the environmental health of the area by evaluating progress against 13 key targets using more than 50 indicators.

"What we found is that the Heart of Borneo is doing quite well," he said.

"It's a huge area, very remote, very diverse in terms of its forest types, fresh water ecosystem and peatlands and biodiversity," he said.

The Heart of Borneo comprised some of Kalimantan's best remaining lowland forests, Tomasek said. "The lowland tropical rain forest is extremely important, as it is a biodiverse area where you can find more species per meter than any other ecosystem," he said.