In danger: An orangutan climbs a rubber tree in Rimba Sawang village, Aceh Tamiang. Shrinking forestland has caused animals to enter plantations and settlements.

Rescuing Orangutans in Aceh

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One morning, an orangutan evacuation team arrived in a hilly area with only a few rubber trees left in Aceh Tamiang.

The 15-member team from the Leuser Ecosystem Management Agency (BPKEL), the Sumatra Orangutan Conservation Program (SOCP), the Orangutan Information Center (OIC) and the Aceh Orangutan Forum (FORA) was walking on red soil newly leveled for plantations.

The red land, cleared of rubber trees by workers of PT Bahruny, an estate company owned by Oil Palm Business Association (GAPKI) chair Joefly J Bahroeny, is located in Rimba Sawang village, Aceh Tamiang, bordering North Sumatra.

Atop an almost dead rubber tree was an orangutan and its one-year-old offspring, sitting and basking in the morning sun.

Their long, golden brown hair was in sharp contrast to their skinny bodies due to undernourishment.

"These orangutans were trapped in this location as workers started felling rubber trees for oil palm plants," said OIC volunteer Krisna Ketapel.

Krisna is a local resident recruited by the OIC, an NGO engaged in watching over and monitoring orangutans emerging from forestland to enter the estates around his village home in Rimba Sawang.

The team's visit to the plantations was meant to evacuate the orangutans isolated in the location, where only a small number of rubber trees can still be found. The other hills around it were already denuded and converted into circling terraces for oil palm planting.

The presence of orangutans was detected before they were slaughtered by estate workers while leveling the area. "We estimate hundreds of them are still trapped with the widespread land clearing operation for new plantations," Krisna said.

Krisna has often witnessed orangutans going down to the estates near his village, usually from the protected forest in the Leuser ecosystem zone, only four kilometers from the closest plantations.

Rampant illegal logging and land reclamation for estates are seen as considerably disturbing the habitat of orangutans in the areas adjacent to the Leuser zone. The activity also increases the intensity of conflict between wildlife like tigers and elephants and man.

"In the last two to three years we've been informed of the orangutans frequently trapped in estates particularly in Aceh or North Sumatra border areas or asked to evacuate them," said Ian Singleton, director of the SOCP.

The SOCP is a collaboration between the government and several NGOs like PanEco Switzerland, the Lestari Ecosystem Foundation (YEL) and the Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) in Germany, focusing on orangutan conservation in Sumatra and covering orangutan rescue, quarantine and release.

Previously, the SOCP evacuated orangutans from several locations in Aceh and North Sumatra. In addition, it also confiscated protected animals from individuals or orangutans from communities that had domesticated them.

According to Ian Singleton, the opening of estate areas in Aceh Tamiang began in 2005 in the early period of peaceful agreement between the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian government. Prior to the accord, land clearing wasn't so widespread because Aceh was embroiled in armed conflict.

Now, when there's conflict between animals and men during reclamation, estate owners tend to urge NGOs or environmental activists to intervene by moving or catching the animals without understanding the underlying causes of the problem. Estate companies are even prepared to fund the relocation of trapped orangutans.

"The media has frequently initiated the discourse that estate companies should contact NGOs or authorized agencies when they find orangutans in their land clearing areas for relocation," noted Singleton. In his view, this is not a desirable solution, nor will it be favorable to the animals concerned. In reality, this method doesn't much prevent the slaughter of orangutans lost in plantations.

"We're convinced the number of orangutans killed in the process of land clearing has been far bigger than the total rescued, especially in areas where the government and environmental activists find it hard to monitor," he said. In Aceh Tamiang, there are tens of thousands of hectares of rubber and oil palm estates owned by estate firms and individuals, mostly bordering the Leuser



Evacuation: A government-NGO joint evacuation team rescues newly caught orangutans to be released to the nearest forest suitable for them to live.

ecosystem – recognized by UNESCO as one of the world's ecosystems.

The BPKEL managing the zone has revoked estate licenses many times for encroaching on protected forestland within the Leuser ecosystem.

Since 2009, the BPKEL has canceled 26 estate permits for illegal operations in restricted areas, covering 3,700 hectares of oil palm plantations and thousands of hectares of land already cleared but not yet planted.

"The pressure on this conservation zone will be greater and more severe unless strict control is exercised, particularly with the opening of an access road in the area close to Leuser," said Badrul, conservation manager of the BPKEL. To prevent graver damage and the loss of rare animals' habitats, this agency has been restoring the original estates and forest areas by replanting them with various trees.

— PHOTOS BY HOTLI SIMANJUNTAK