

The Last Rainforest in Borneo

After two days of air travel, I arrived in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan. I was smack dab in the middle of Indonesian Borneo, the province with the highest rate of deforestation and the epicenter of 2015's sweeping wildfires and resultant haze that wreaked havoc on the region. This was no beautiful island of my dreams. The humidity would not last, I was told by CIMTROP field manager, Kitso Kusin.

"We are frantically trying to build dams to keep water in the canals," Kusin said, as I filmed him with my Sony DSLR in the backyard of his University of Palangkaraya office. CIMTROP, the Center for International Cooperation in Sustainable Management of Tropical Peatland, was planning for the dry season, doing their best to stop the inevitable wildfires from spreading. They build dams throughout the 45,000 kilometers of canals that have been dug to drain the peat swamp and cut the forest.

Draining the peat is the first step in cultivating land for palm oil plantations (and for the nearby Mega Rice Project, a failed government initiative that has since been abandoned).

In 2016, Greenpeace reported that the 2015 fires cost the Indonesian economy approximately 16 billion dollars and resulted in an estimated 100,000 premature deaths in the region and in nearby Malaysia and Singapore. "In addition to releasing vast amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, [peatland fires] also release particulates that are terrible for human respiratory health. So, it's really quite tragic," said Frances Seymour, co-author of the book "Why Forests, Why Now."

Words & Photos
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In terms of climate protection, the peat swamp forests of Indonesia are some of the most valuable forests in the world. This bed of peat that the forest sits upon is a “carbon sink,” with the ability to absorb 10 times more carbon than any other forest on earth. “If we were to halt deforestation tomorrow and allow all the damaged forests to grow back, we estimate that it could constitute between 24 to 30 percent of global net emissions,” Seymour explained. “So, we’re looking at between a quarter and a third of the solution to climate change. And yet tropical forests get nowhere near the share of political attention and finance in debates on global climate change.”

How did Borneo, until recently the largest consecutive rainforest on Earth, get reduced to basically one big flammable palm oil plantation? It is the classic story of globalization and indigenous oppression. You probably know about palm oil, but it is likely you do not know the severity of the problem. A report by WWF Malaysia and WWF Indonesia, titled “The Environmental Status of Borneo 2017,” estimates that if the current patterns continue, 75 percent of Borneo’s forests could be gone by the year 2020. Although the negative impact this land conversion process has on endangered species, such as the Bornean orangutan, has received some attention, little media coverage has focused on the plight of the indigenous Dayak people.

I set off with my team—Arie Rompas and Meta Septalisa, both Dayak environmental and indigenous rights activists—to begin capturing footage that could shed light on this ongoing struggle. As the streets of Palangkaraya faded

into the distance, I thought, “This must be where I see forest.” However, before me appeared the skeletons of burnt trees and low bushes stretching into the horizon, soon to be replaced by rows of oil palm trees. As the hours passed, we sang along to the radio, trying not to think about the death of this once beautiful land. For the next four days of driving, oil palms were all we would see.

“These are Wilmar plantation,” said Arie, as the sun was setting. “All of this Wilmar.” I asked how Wilmar, the largest plantation owner in Central Kalimantan, got all of this land. “Concessions from the government,” he replied. “Either land grabbing from local communities, or they were able to convince the villages to give up their land.”

As I came to find out, these companies have an arsenal of weapons against the Dayak, the rightful land owners. The primary tribe of Borneo, Dayak have the most beautiful religion—the forest. Traditionally animists, they held the belief that everything in nature has a spirit, a higher power. “The forest give their livelihood, their house, their life. To Dayak, the forest is their identity,” Arie related.

But in some places, media and modern desires to have cell phones and mopeds have infiltrated this way of life. It was sad witnessing this process causing division within villages—the division between those attracted by the allure of modernity and those wanting to maintain the traditional ways. “There’s no benefit for the people,” said Mina Setra, a Dayak from West Kalimantan and an indigenous rights leader and activist. “Sometime in the first 10 years,





15 years, it give benefit to the people. But after that, the production goes down, and they get very poor. And then they have to rely on the market."

Recently, Setra led a successful congressional court battle to change the Indonesian forestry law from stating that "customary forest is state forest" to "customary forest is forest with indigenous territory."

While this is a step in the right direction, much damage has already been done. According to the Indonesian Forum for Environment (WALHI), in Central Kalimantan, the government has already given permits to companies for 78 percent of the land. That does not include national parks, where deforestation is eroding the last remaining habitats for Bornean flora and fauna. This is the case for the village of Biru Maju, where we stopped for a night.

Pak Purnomo, the Chief of Village, had a particularly nasty landgrabbing story to tell. A tall, broad-shouldered man, Purnomo carries himself like a leader. In 1997, the government gave Wilmar a license to open the land of his village. "Instead of using their authority to resolve the conflict, the government just acted like a catalyst actor," said Purnomo. Unaided, the village had no choice but to protest the company themselves. In retaliation, Purnomo explains, "The company chose to say that I had stolen the company palm fruit, and they went to the police. And the police put me in jail!"

Purnomo was criminalized for defending the land of his village. While he was in jail, the land was entirely converted to

plantation. All of the forest was gone. To this day, Purnomo is working to attain some form of compensation through the court system. He misses the forest very much.

"My family love the sound of gibbon in the morning. But now, we don't hear the sound of gibbon. Because they are gone," he said. Purnomo said he is worried about the next generation, "Because the next generation cannot look at the gibbon or orangutan."

The hot, dry, nightmarish palm oil maze that is all that is left of Biru Maju is a juicy juxtaposition to the lush rainforested village of Kubung. A 14-hour drive from Palangkaraya, Kubung is a shining example of happy, healthy Dayak in a sustainably managed forest. They welcomed me with a ceremony that involved drinking traditional rice wine, beram, and dancing the hornbill dance. Every day, the whole community gathers to enjoy each other's company. Here, the traditional ways are adhered to, and the allure of modernity is ignored. The air was pleasant. There was a glow to the people's hair and skin. The overwhelming feeling was health and vitality. You could feel it radiating from all those who lived in Kubung, and it brought home a deeper understanding of what had been lost in Biru Maju.

"If you take care of the people in the forest, you will take care of the forest," said Setra. Indeed, the attention to detail was astounding. Every leaf was accounted for. "We can take everything from the forest, so that's why I love the forest," says Marta, the wife of Kubung's Chief of Village. I asked her what is

climate change, and she didn't know. I asked her why she stays in the forest.

"Because this is my place," she said with pride. I interviewed a few villagers, and the answers were all the same. But there was some concern for the future, and most people remarked that they felt a difference in the weather. In the past "it was so very cold and very comfortable. But right now, I feel so very hot, so very, very hot," said Mama Agu.

I had the privilege of visiting Batu Batungkat, the Kubung's sacred rock. It overlooks a broad vista of mountains, wisps of cloud clinging to them, the highest of which is considered the final resting place of the souls of Kubung. I wish my soul could join them on the mountains of Kalimantan, but I know that a piece of me will always stay there.

The resounding feeling that remained at the end of this whirlwind—of sleeping on the floors of shacks, waking up at dawn to lug heavy equipment around and being inspired by beauty countless times—is that I was there to learn. And that being there, learning and documenting, was far more powerful than any lasting memories of my presence.

I hope that the words and images of this trip stay with you, an insight into how human beings have evolved on this planet Earth. And how the consequences of our actions, ripple, to the remote corners of our planet, to the headwaters of the great rivers of Borneo. You must ask yourself, "Do I want my children to see orangutans thriving in the wild? To know that my generation was not responsible for wiping the last tribe of

forest-dwelling people out of existence?" I know the Regeneration does. The first step is knowing.

We believe this film we are creating will contribute to the protection of the last remaining forests of Borneo and those who reside therein. While production for this film was funded by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, the generosity of a private donor and the Center for Environmental Filmmaking, we cannot finish it without your help.

Please consider a donation to our Indiegogo campaign launching November 2017 with the goal of \$25,000 for post-production. The money raised will fund editing, graphics and animation, as well as sound mixing and music composition by Michael Travis, drummer for the String Cheese Incident and Eoto.

Follow @Vanishingtribesfilm on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter for updates.

“It is not only responsibility for Indonesia, for us to save the forest. It is the responsibility of everybody. Everyone can save their forest in their own country, but you are also responsible for saving the forest in other countries too. Because we are citizens of the world!”

-Mina Setra

