

Femke van den Bos
Contributor/Blandford, U.K.

Kalimantan, the Indonesian territory on Borneo island, is well known for its pristine tropical forests, rich natural resources and exotic flora and fauna. Only a few places remain on earth with such a biodiversity, providing shelter and food to hundreds of endangered species.

Kalimantan is home to 10 million people, of whom most belong to the traditional Dayak tribes, or *orang gunung* (mountain people). In accordance with their culture, the indigenous Dayak feel a strong spiritual connection to the rainforest, on which they depend for food and medicines, and cultivate rice and fruit on a small scale.

In recent decades, much of their rainforest has been cleared for logging and oil palm plantations for the production of palm oil — the most widely produced, cheap edible oil in the world, which is now being used in biofuels as well.

Clearing land for oil palm plantations has led to numerous conflicts with local communities.

The chair of the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has warned that five million indigenous people in West Kalimantan alone are likely to become refugees because of biofuel expansion.

Soil erosion, landslides, haze, drought and floods are becoming an everyday reality as the destruction of rainforests continues. Many Dayak tribes have frequently tried to blockade logging roads to protect their forests, often to no avail.

At present, the local community in Tumbang Koling, Central Kalimantan, is trying to protect the surrounding natural environment. The forest of Cempaga is located adjacent to Tumbang Koling, a village four hours' drive from the provincial capital of Palangkaraya. The people who live there depend on the



A trail of destruction is left behind as rainforest is cleared for an oil palm plantation, with the cut wood turning a

forests for their livelihood: rubber, rattan and wood.

In 1972, the Tumbang Koling community realized they had to join forces in order to protect their rainforest.

Stone Cristoffel Sahabu formed a community group, Pantis Pandelum, for this purpose. And the right to protect their rainforest was endorsed on Sept. 27, 2001, by Utan Teke, Pundu village head, as well as Cempaga subdistrict head Zainuddin Safri.

Pantis Pandelum succeeded in preserving their forest — until October 2006.

Without warning, bulldozers and excavators entered Cempaga forest, clearing the land for yet another oil palm plantation.

According to Pantis Pandelum, PT. Nabatindo Karia Utama (NKU) started to clear 30 hectares of rainforest a day, despite local opposition and a statement by the Indonesian Palm Oil Growers Association

declaring they “will not cut down forests”.

But the concession permit issued by the head of Kotawaringin Timur district has apparently overruled the principle of community forest. On Feb. 28 this year, the Central Kalimantan governor instructed the Kotawaringin Timur head to resolve the problem.

Unfortunately, the oil palm company continues to tear down trees while officials procrastinate.

The community forest, originally covering an area of 10,000 hectares, has rapidly been reduced to only 5,000 hectares in a few months.

On June 18, bulldozers entered the last remaining patches of Pantis Pandelum forest. NKU ignored protests as well as a letter issued June 9 by the local district head, Wim R.K. Ninung, demanding they halt activities within the remaining 5,000 hectares.

In May, Pantis Pandelum

asked the Centre for Orangutan Protection (COP; www.orangutanprotection.com), for help. In June, COP conducted a biodiversity survey in the remaining forest; the ensuing report showed a very dense population of orangutans in the Cempaga forest.

According to Pantis Pandelum's Cristoffel, less than 30 orangutan individuals used to live in the forest area, but the population appeared to have doubled due to habitat loss in the surrounding areas, with forests replaced by oil palm plantations.

Orangutans only live on Borneo and Sumatra, and are estimated to become extinct in the wild within 10 years, joining many other lesser known species.

The COP team also found endangered langurs, gibbons, deer, crocodiles, Sun bears, dozens of endangered bird species as well as butterflies and other insects.

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