

Chainsaw massacre

Illegal loggers are raping Indonesia's national parks, jeopardizing endangered species. Why they get away with it

Yenni Kwok in Kalimantan



Photos: Tantyo Bangun

Tanjung Puting National Park has been called a natural jewel of Indonesia's Central Kalimantan. Located on a peninsula that juts into the Java Sea, the park is Southeast Asia's largest protected area of peat-swamp forest and home to a diverse array of plant and animal species, the most legendary being the orangutan. About 2,000 of the endangered animals - or up to 13% of the planet's wild population - live in the 415,040-hectare park. They share the refuge with 200 bird species, 17 types of reptile and 28 other kinds of mammal, many on an inexorable slide to extinction.

In recent years another species has become increasingly prevalent in Tanjung Puting National Park. This predator has developed a ravenous taste for ramin trees. The interloper in question: the illegal logger.

Timber thieves' growing presence in protected wilderness is a direct result of the political and economic crises that are buffeting Indonesia. Factory closures have prompted men to head for protected areas like Tanjung Puting, where they can make enough money to feed and clothe themselves. Jakarta's

declining influence in the provinces means there is little local incentive to police protected areas; quite the opposite, in fact. Many of the logging concessions lavished on Suharto cronies have been revoked, and a new generation of timber gangster has muscled in on the industry. These people have even fewer environmental scruples than their predecessors.

In the western part of Tanjung Puting National Park, primatologist Birute Galdikas operates Camp Leakey, an orangutan research station named after the legendary paleontologist Louis Leakey. Galdikas, 52, has been working in the park on and off since 1971. She has tangled often over the years with the powerful logging interests - and been threatened for her outspokenness. Yet even Suharto's cronies would not risk international outrage by encroaching on the research station.

Now, however, the rules of the game have changed and she worries that ordinary people desperate for money may be tempted by the large number of ramin trees in and around Camp Leakey. Galdikas says illegal loggers are straying ever closer. When the encroachment began she had no one to turn to. Galdikas says the park chief at the time made no effort to halt the logging. "He is Javanese," she says, "and more interested in formalities."

But Galdikas has an ally in the current park chief Suherty, a Dayak and native son of Kalimantan. Upon being posted to Tanjung Puting last March, Suherty, 46, vowed to crack down on the illegal loggers. It hasn't been easy. He has at his disposal 37 wardens, two guns, two speedboats and a klotok - versus thousands of loggers often equipped with faster boats. Besides, park officials, the police and military often work with the loggers. Suherty sums up his resources this way: "We're no more than a police statue in the middle of the road." Still, in August Jakarta sent 100 police into the park and deployed two naval ships as part of the Forest Respect '99 anti-illegal logging campaign. Several suspected loggers were nabbed, two barges confiscated and logging trails destroyed. But the authorities failed to crack down on sawmill owners.

Nor have they moved against Tanjung Lingga Group chief Abdul Rasyid, a timber baron named in a report by the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency. Investigators who posed as wood buyers say his nephew, Sugianto, told them the group offered legal and illegal business opportunities, but suggested the second to avoid a 30% export duty. He also allegedly said his uncle could buy stolen ramin wood seized by the

authorities. Sugianto denies it and told *Asiaweek*: "We have our own concessions. Why steal from Tanjung Puting?" As for the allegation that he suggested illegal means to avoid the 30% export tax, Sugianto says: "I made it up because I knew they were liars. I treated them well as guests. Is this how they thank me? Even the orangutans know how to give thanks for a good deed."

Is there hope? Optimists say that if the new government in Jakarta decentralizes power, as politicians have suggested, local officials will have more incentive to protect forest lands. Pessimists say exactly the opposite will happen. Still, the issue is becoming an international one. Last month activists in several American cities picketed Home Depot, the building-supply chain. One of their targets: tool handles made from ramin wood.

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