

Logging at Bohorok

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The felling of forest adjacent to the well-known Bohorok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre in North Sumatra, Indonesia, stimulated a series of local and national government responses, the course of which is instructive for those trying to grapple with conservation problems in Indonesia and elsewhere. The authors followed the story while working as Advisor to the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the University of North Sumatra, Medan, and World Wildlife Fund volunteer at the Bohorok Centre, respectively.

Bohorok is one of the four active rehabilitation centres for orang-utans, and the only one in Sumatra. It is one of Sumatra's major tourist attractions after Lake Toba, and each year receives up to 5000 domestic visitors, and up to 1000 foreign visitors. The numbers belie the interest in the Centre because visitor numbers are controlled, and at weekends many people have to return home without seeing orang-utans. In general, about three times as many people visit the car park area for picnicking, swimming and camping as visit the Centre. Much has been written about both the rehabilitation of orang-utans and the conservation education activities at Bohorok (Rijksen and Rijksen-Graatsma, 1975; MacKinnon, 1977; Aveling, 1982; Aveling and Mitchell, 1982).

The Bohorok Rehabilitation Centre is just inside the Gunung Leuser National Park, and the boundary at this point is marked by the Bohorok river. Across the river from the National Park is an area of State Forest (*Hutan Negara Bebas*), which, unlike national park land, can be exploited if a licence is obtained from the Forestry

Department. The closest village to the Centre is Bukit Lawang, about 1.5 km away.

In early January 1981 the felling of large dipterocarp trees in the State Forest opposite the Rehabilitation Centre began. No licence had been sought, but the logging represented the more or less logical extension of the process of timber extraction, clear-felling for cash crops and some subsistence crops, and minor settlements that has been advancing towards this particular boundary of the Gunung Leuser National Park for decades.

The Manager of the rehabilitation station promptly reported the felling to the Regent (*Bupati*) of Langkat County and the District Officer (*Camat*) on 17 January. No action was taken and the felling continued. On 31 March the head of the provincial Conservation Service wrote to the Governor of North Sumatra province asking him to take steps to rescue the forest and to recognize formally 1 sq km of the forest opposite the Rehabilitation Centre as a tourist forest.

On 5 May the Governor organized a team comprising representatives from the Regional Planning Board, the provincial Population and Environment Bureau, the Forestry Service and the Conservation Service to examine the problem. This team visited the affected area on 9 May and prepared a report, which suggested that: the intrusion into the State Forest should cease forthwith, and that alternative land should be sought for the people who were damaging the forest; a detailed survey should be conducted as a basis for forming a tourist area; the Minister of Agriculture, through the Governor, should decree the area a tourist forest and initiate a

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management plan; and appropriate facilities should be constructed for visitors. No action resulted from the report, and the felling continued.

In June and July, letters passed between the Conservation Department, the provincial Tourist Service and a commercial tour and travel service concerning the unhindered forest destruction and its probable effects on the tourist business there. On 17 July the head of the provincial Conservation Service again wrote to the Governor saying: 'We request again that you take immediate steps to save the State Forest from destruction by irresponsible people'. * As a result of that letter, the Governor wrote to the Regent of Langkat on 28 August explaining the value of the forest being destroyed and the negative effects of such destruction. He asked the Regent to work together with the Forestry Department and local police. In response to that, the Regent organized a visit to the affected area on 12 September by a wide range of local government officials.

At about this time, an independent party sent a report on the situation at Bohorok to Professor Emil Salim, Indonesia's Minister for Development Supervision and Environment (now Population and Environment). He well knew the value and future potential of the area for education and conservation and sent a strongly worded letter to the Ministers of Agriculture and Internal Affairs asking them to instruct their staff to check the situation in the field and to take appropriate measures to save the Bohorok forest.

A copy of that letter was received by the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the University of North Sumatra in Medan and a visit to review the situation was arranged. At that time, nine months after the felling began, some of the forest near the tourist shelter (built some years earlier by the Conservation Service) on a ridge opposite the rehabilitation station had been totally destroyed, and some hill rice and other crops had been planted. The forest leading from the car park and the forest visible from the river crossing to the rehabilitation station were more or less intact and still quite attractive. This was because the logging had been very selective, with only the largest, straight damar (*Dipterocarpus*

sp.) trees having been felled, and consequently many young but sizeable damar remained. In addition, the logs had been hauled down to the river by buffalo, so there was none of the damage normally encountered where tractors are used. In fact, some treefalls had 'improved' the walk up the ridge by opening up some spectacular views of the National Park. In common with other such selectively logged forest in South-East Asia, many species of wildlife, including gibbons, remained (Johns, 1983). It was also clear from the visit that the major drive behind the felling could not have been agricultural expansion since many slopes are far too steep. Those responsible were neither landless nor entrepreneurs, and other under-utilized land with agricultural potential existed closer to the nearby village of Bukit Lawang. The primary reason for felling the forest was to sell the timber, which was transported to nearby sawmills to produce building material for local use.

Thus, considering that the forest being destroyed was the best patch of forest within easy reach of Medan (a bustling city of over 1 million people) and was already on international tour routes, and that the potential of the forest as a tourist forest had not at that time been destroyed, it was recommended, in an illustrated report from the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies handed to Professor Salim on 14 October, that the Minister for Agriculture should be encouraged as soon as possible to declare both sides of the ridge opposite the rehabilitation station as a tourist forest. Also, since those who had felled the timber had already benefited from selling the high-grade wood, the newly formed crop areas should be abandoned. No one would be made landless or homeless by such action.

Professor Salim promptly sent copies of the report to the Ministers of Agriculture and Internal Affairs and requested them to implement the recommendations immediately. The report was copied and distributed further and the Director-General of Forestry, Director of Conservation, and the Governor (amongst others) all gave their support to the report and its recommendations. Unfortunately, no punitive, restorative or direct action was taken at the lowest levels, that is regarding the 'farmers' themselves. As a consequence, the felling not only continued, but increased its pace, since it was clear to those

*Authors' translation.

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working on the slopes that the series of visits by teams from various organs of local government might one day result in a ban on felling. It was only logical to get as much marketable timber out as possible, and to clear and burn land and to plant crops before any such ban came into effect.

The present situation (March 1986) is that the slopes facing the Rehabilitation Centre are still covered in a semblance of forest, but there are obvious gaps in the canopy and there are a number of bare mud slides visible down which felled trees were shot into the river. One of these slides can be seen from where the tourists cross to the rehabilitation station. The forest inside the National Park boundary has not been touched. The status of the logged land is still not resolved. The Office of Nature Conservation for Northern Sumatra has been offered the land as a tourist forest, but it is not prepared simply to accept degraded land without some promise of reparation. The urgency has gone out of the situation and it will probably be some years before anything final (and legally watertight) is decided. Meanwhile, however, developments (of greater and lesser attractiveness) for visitors have continued, including the construction of food stalls between the car park and the river, and improvements to the camping ground. There are hopes that a new education centre will be built near the car park rather than across the river so that all visitors, not just those on their way to observe the orang-utans, can be reached by the conservation message. A Dutch volunteer has recently begun working with the Conservation Department on education projects.

What can be learned from the above story? Firstly, the high levels of the Indonesian Government fully understand the conservation-for-development ethic. Secondly, the Rehabilitation Centre and its surroundings have genuine economic value as can be judged by the concern of the tourist agency. Thirdly, forest conservation for development or any other reason is not really understood by many of the people living on the land or the government officials with immediate authority over them. In some areas this might stem from a desperate need for land and food, but in others, such as the example discussed here, this just is not so. Probably closer to the mark are

many of the problems facing conservation in many developed and lesser-developed countries, among which are short-term political expediency of lower-level employees, and self-interest. The higher levels of government are quite well aware of the problems, and efforts are made to get the message across. It is a rare week in which there is nothing in the major national daily newspaper or on the television, which are read and watched avidly, about the connection between soil conservation and water, land-use zoning, forest destruction and so on. Fourthly, the recreation value of the Centre is worth more in the long-term for the people of Bukit Lawang than is the logging. The proceeds from the logging have long since dried up for the villagers, but they continue to benefit not just from the entrance fee to Bukit Lawang and car parking fees but also from guiding and providing accommodation and food. It should be pointed out that the damage to the forest did not lead to any obvious drop in visitor numbers, but it did rob the Conservation Service and the increasing numbers of national and international visitors of an area of especial value to those not wanting or able to watch the orang-utans.

Education is one of the main purposes and activities of the Rehabilitation Centre. With the high number of people visiting the Centre being maintained, it would be logical to exploit their presence and convey a conservation message. However, the people around the Centre should not be forgotten, for it is they who most need educating about conservation.

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