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Asia Pulp & Paper/Sinar Mas Group Set to Destroy Orangutan Reintroduction Site, Critical Tiger Forest

Embargoed until May 19 on 12AM Indonesia time

19 May 2009, Jambi, INDONESIA – A massive logging operation planned by one of the world’s largest paper companies will destroy the forest home of 100 great apes that are part of the only successful reintroduction program for Sumatran orangutans, conservationists have learned.

Five groups working in the area -- WARSI, the Sumatran Tiger Conservation and Protection Foundation, Frankfurt Zoological Society, Zoological Society of London and WWF-Indonesia -- have learned that a joint venture company of Asia Pulp & Paper/Sinar Mas Group (APP/SMG) recently got a license to clear the largest portion of natural forest remaining outside the Bukit Tigapuluh National Park in Jambi Province, Sumatra. With this latest acquisition, APP/SMG and associated companies could convert all remaining natural forest outside the park in the province, one of the most important areas for biodiversity in Indonesia.

APP/SMG and associated companies has already begun converting natural forest in parts of Bukit Tigapuluh. In 2008, they completed a legally questionable logging highway through this unique natural forest ecosystem to allow easier transport of wood to its pulp mills in both Jambi and neighboring Riau Province. The five NGOs are concerned that APP could start natural forest conversion in two concessions early next year and sent a letter to the Ministry of Forestry, asking the agency to not allow APP/SMG to do so and instead protect these forests.

“It took scientists decades to discover how to successfully reintroduce critically endangered orangutans from captivity into the wild. It could take APP just months to destroy an important part of their new habitat,” said Peter Pratje of the Frankfurt Zoological Society. “These lowland forests are excellent habitat for orangutans, which is why we got government permission to release them here beginning in 2002. The apes are thriving now, breeding and establishing new family groups.”

The area is one of the most endangered forests on all of Sumatra, an island already suffering from what is possibly the fastest deforestation rate in the world. This forest landscape included close to 450,000 hectares of mostly still healthy and contiguous natural forest as of 2007; only 29 percent is protected as Bukit Tigapuluh National Park, while the rest is vulnerable to clearing.

This unprotected forest is essential habitat for an estimated 100 of the last 400 critically endangered Sumatran tigers left in the wild.

“Bukit Tigapuluh is one of the most important habitats remaining for Sumatran tigers,” said Dolly Priatna of Zoological Society of London. “APP’s plan is devastating and it will almost certainly lead to more fatalities since tigers and people will be forced into closer contact with each other as the tigers’ forest disappears. Tigers struggling to survive as Jambi’s forests shrink have already killed nine people in the area this year.”

Bukit Tigapuluh is also home to around 40-60 endangered Sumatran elephants, which spend most of their time outside the national park.

“The local extinction of Sumatran elephants in the Bukit Tigapuluh area is a real possibility if APP isn’t stopped,” said Yunus of Yayasan PKHS (the Sumatran Tiger Conservation and Protection Foundation). “We urge APP’s customers, investors and other business partners to realize that the company is increasing its threat to one of the most endangered natural forest blocks in Sumatra and the unique species living there.”

Two minority indigenous tribes – the Talang Mamak and Orang Rimba – both live inside Bukit Tigapuluh’s natural forest and depend on natural resources from the forest and river for their existence. “APP is stealing their livelihood, which will marginalize their lives even more,” said Diki Kurniawan of Warsi. “I have worked in this forest with these people since 1996. Is there no way we can protect them from this greedy global giant?”

Between 1985 and 2007, Sumatra island lost 12 million hectares of natural forest, a 48 percent loss in 22 years. By 2007, the island had only 30 percent natural forest cover (around 13 million hectares). The Indonesian Ministries of Forestry, Environment, Public Works and Interior, as well as the governors of all 10 Sumatran provinces, including Jambi, last year announced their collective commitment to protecting the areas of the island with “high conservation values.” The commitment was celebrated publicly at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, Spain, in October 2008.

The natural forest slated for destruction by APP – Bukit Tigapuluh – is a prime example of the high conservation value areas that the governors promised to protect.

“These NGOs are ready to support the Jambi governor to implement his public commitment to protecting Sumatra’s high conservation value areas and halt APP/SMG’s plan and identify alternative financing that would provide money and still save the forests, such as credits in the emerging forest carbon market,” said Ian Kosasih of WWF Indonesia. “Bukit Tigapuluh’s forest have great potential as a demonstration project of REDD, due to the high co-benefits here – biodiversity and an indigenous community, as well as high avoidable emissions.”

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Editors Notes:

- APP/SMG and associated companies has already been converting natural forest in PT. Tebo Multi Agro and PT. Wanamukti Wisesa. Recently, APP/SMG also opened a logging highway through this unique natural forest ecosystem, through ex PT. IFA and ex PT. Dalek Hutani Esa, to facilitate MTH transportation to both Jambi and Riau.
- Today, APP/SMG is waiting for AMDAL (Environmental Impact Assessment) to be finalized for ex PT. Dalek Hutani Esa concession, where many of the orangutans reintroduced in 2002 spend their time. NGOs question the quality of the AMDAL study submitted by APP/SMG, as negative impacts on key wildlife and indigenous people are not considered at all. NGOs are concerned that APP/SMG could start natural forest conversion in the concession early next year.
- APP/SMG and associated companies have a history of controversial and legally questionable forest conversion activities in central Sumatra.
- The new APP/SMG logging road in the Bukit Tigapuluh forest has already opened up access for rampant illegal logging practices, which BKSDA Jambi believes has led to the increased human-tiger conflict.
- In August 2008, the five groups, the Forestry Service of Jambi, BKSDA Jambi and Bukit Tigapuluh National Park Management Authority agreed that 74% of the remaining natural forest 2007 would be considered the “Bukit Tigapuluh Ecosystem” and should be sustainably managed as natural forest.
- A map of Bukit Tigapuluh area and its natural forest, distribution of reintroduced orangutans and Sumatran tigers, elephants, Bukit Tigapuluh ecosystem and APP/SMG associated pulpwood plantation (HTI) concessions, is include in this PR or published on <http://www.savesumatra.org/index.php/newspublications/mapdetail/1.0/3> .
- A collection of documents published by NGOs can be found at: <http://www.savesumatra.org/index.php/link>, including a joint release and investigative report published by the same 5 NGOs in 2008 on APP’s activities in Bukit Tigapuluh.
- Regarding the historic agreement by 10 Sumatran Governors to protect the world's most endangered tropical forests, see: <http://www.savesumatra.org/index.php/newspublications/newsdetail/1>

For further information, please contact:

- Peter H Pratje (FZS) : +628127495815 /phpratje@gmail.com
- Diki Kurniawan (Warsi) : +628127407730 /dicky@warsi.or.id
- Dolly Priatna (ZSL) : +6281389001566 /Dolly.Priatna@zsl.org
- Afdhal Mahyuhddin (WWF) : +6281389768248 / amahyudin@wwf.or.id
- M. Yunus (Yayasan PKHS) : +6281365705246 /yunus_pkhsb30@plasa.com

Pictures and the joint letter sent to the Ministry of Forestry (available both in Bahasa Indonesia and English) are available upon request by contacting Dyah Ekarini drini@wwf.or.id