

Destruction of Sumatra forests driving global climate change and species extinction

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Turning just one Sumatran province's forests and peat swamps into pulpwood and palm oil plantations is generating more annual greenhouse gas emissions than the Netherlands and rapidly driving the province's elephants into extinction, a new study by WWF and partners has found.

The study found that in central Sumatra's Riau Province nearly 10.5 million acres of tropical forests and peat swamp have been cleared in the last 25 years. Forest loss and degradation and peat decomposition and fires are behind average annual carbon emissions equivalent to 122 percent of the Netherlands total annual emissions, 58 percent of Australia's annual emissions, 39 percent of annual UK emissions and 26 percent of annual German emissions.

Riau was chosen for the study because it is home to vast peatlands estimated to hold Southeast Asia's largest store of carbon, and contains some of the most critical habitat for Sumatran elephants and tigers. It also has Indonesia's highest deforestation rate, substantially driven by the operations of global paper giants Asia Pulp & Paper (APP) and Asia Pacific Resources International Holdings Limited (APRIL).

At last December's Bali Climate Change Conference, the Indonesian minister of Forestry pledged to provide incentives to stop unsustainable forestry practices and protect Indonesia's forests. The governor of Riau province has also made a public commitment to protect the province's remaining forest.

“This groundbreaking report gives U.S. businesses a roadmap for getting the biggest bang for their buck,” said Adam Tomasek, managing director of the Borneo and Sumatra program at WWF-US. “An investment in Riau Province would both protect some of the world's largest carbon stores and safeguard endangered tigers, elephants and local communities.”

Carbon emissions are likely to increase, the study predicted, as most future forest clearance is planned for areas with deep peat soils.

“The loss of Sumatra's carbon-rich forest ecosystems is not just Indonesia's problem – this affects the environmental health of the entire planet,” added Tomasek.

The report by WWF, Remote Sensing Solution GmbH and Hokkaido University breaks new ground by analyzing for the first time the connection between deforestation and forest degradation, global climate change, and population declines of tigers and elephants.

The province has lost 65 percent of its forests over the last 25 years and in recent years has suffered Indonesia's fastest deforestation rates. In the same period there was an 84 percent decline in elephant populations, down to only 210 individuals, while tiger populations are estimated to have declined by 70 percent to perhaps just 192 individuals.

““WWF is alarmed that the loss of forests is taking such a high toll not only on the remaining wild elephants and tigers in Sumatra but also on global climate change,” said Dr Sybille Klenzendorf, director of species conservation at WWF-US. “The message is clear – the world must commit to solutions that can save these forests if we are to significantly slow the rate of climate change and allow nature and people to flourish in Sumatra.”

Led by global paper giants APP and APRIL, the pulp & paper and palm oil industries are driving Riau's Sumatran tigers and elephants to local extinction in just a few years by destroying their habitat, the study found.

Source: World Wildlife Fund

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