

Saving Indonesia's birds-of-paradise one village at a time

October 26 2017, by Kiki Siregar



Once plentiful in Papua's jungles, rampant poaching and deforestation have devastated populations of the region's renowned birds-of-paradise

Deep in Indonesia's easternmost province, a group of birdwatchers wait in earnest hoping to glimpse the renowned birds-of-paradise. Once plentiful in Papua's jungles, rampant poaching and deforestation have

devastated populations.

The tourists are in luck, their patience is rewarded: Perched on the branch of a tall tree near the remote village of Malagufuk, a red king bird-of-paradise can be seen darting between the leaves.

Agricultural plantations, touted as a means to improve economic opportunities, are rapidly expanding in Papua. But some villagers and conservationists warn this will result in forests being destroyed and the birds that inhabit them driven to the brink of extinction.

Birds-of-paradise numbers were already dwindling in Papua as they are poached, killed and used for decoration. Authorities have since banned the sale of the species but there is still a thriving illegal trade because international demand is high.

Authorities have banned the sale of birds-of-paradise, but this has not done much to dent the [illegal trade](#), because demand is high.

"Nowadays the threat is not just wildlife hunting, but illegal logging. The conversion of forests to palm oil and cocoa plantations is the biggest threat," bird guide Charles Roring told AFP.



Environmentalists in Indonesia say the the illegal trade birds-of-paradise, which are often killed, dried and turned into ornaments, is contributing to dwindling numbers in the wild

Indonesia's rainforests are home to 41 birds-of-paradise species, according to Roring, 37 of which can be found in the jungles of Papua.

They range from the lesser bird-of-paradise, known for its yellow and white flank plumes, to the twelve-wired bird-of-paradise, recognisable by the filaments that extend from its tail.

Admired for their striking colours and elaborate courtship rituals, the birds have a long history of being trapped and traded as ornaments.

They captivated Europeans after 16th century explorers returned with skins that had been dried, truncated of their legs and mounted to sticks;

while their colourful feathers are still popular additions to traditional Papuan tribal decorations, such as headdresses.

Serene Chng, a programme officer at environmental NGO Traffic, said the wild birds are smuggled to other parts of Indonesia and Southeast Asia.



Agricultural plantations, touted as a means to improve economic opportunities, are rapidly expanding in Papua, alarming conservationists who warn forests will be destroyed and the birds that inhabit them driven to the brink of extinction

"Law enforcement capacity is very limited," she explained.

"Challenges include demand from consumers, corruption, poor surveillance, as well as lack of support from non-enforcement agencies

that could help like airlines, shippers, courier services and airports,"
Chng added.

Eco-tourism solution

In Sorong, one of the largest cities in Indonesia's West Papua province, a souvenir vendor told AFP traditional headbands made with feathers could fetch as much as 1.5 million rupiah (\$112).

Papua is home to one-third of Indonesia's remaining rainforests but they are being chopped down at a rapid rate.



Papua is home to one-third of Indonesia's remaining rainforests. But in 2014-2015 more than 100,000 hectares of rainforest was chopped down, the region's greatest rate of forest cover loss since 2001, according to monitor Global Forest Watch

Palm oil companies started operating near Malagufuk village about three years ago, according to environmentalist Max Binur, from NGO Belantara Sorong.

Binur, who knew residents were worried the companies would destroy

the surrounding forests and their traditional village life, proposed a solution he believed would protect the birds and forest.

He helped turn Malagufuk into an ecovillage where residents now work as guides or provide accommodation for visitors.

Up to 20 tourists visit each month to see the birds-of-paradise, as well as other bird species such as the Cassowary and Hornbill.

Visitors must trek two hours through the jungle to reach a remote settlement of stilt houses that has limited electricity.



Locals and conservationists are hoping that eco-tourism may help protect the birds, while still bringing in money for the villages

"It sounded like a good ecotourism tour we could do. My mother is into birds and we were familiar with the birds-of-paradise from watching documentaries," German tourist Lisa von Rabenau said.

Binur is planning to launch similar ecovillage ventures across Papua and hopes tourism will lead to conservation of the world-famous [birds](#) and benefit locals.

He explained: "Tourists can bring in a bit of their money so the villagers can afford to nurture their families, send their kids to school, buy clothes and with this they will be conscious to save the nature."

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