

# Why conservation areas are not living up to their potential in Indonesia

April 2 2020, by Lies Wijayanti Rahayu Faida

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Forest in Gunung Leuser National Park. Credit: Junaidi Hanafiah / CC BY-SA

Indonesia is home to the [third-largest tropical forest](#) after the Amazon and Congo. These forests have high biodiversity values and Indonesia has set aside [million of hectares as conservation forests](#) to protect the country's rich biodiversity and the world's climate.

To ensure people who live in and around the forests and depend on them for their livelihoods can survive, the Indonesian government has [set](#)

[zones](#) within conservation forests where local people can continue some activities such as [traditional farming](#), in addition to [religious and cultural traditions](#).

The government also sets zones where human activity is prohibited.

But this zone-based management hasn't been effective in keeping people from building settlements or plantations in the [protected areas](#). Even though [local people have already had their say](#) in determining these zones, it becomes clear there are still many problems in this conservation area management.

## Preservation vs livelihood

Indonesia has declared a third of the nation's forests as conservation forests, around [27 million hectares](#). It's an area the size of two Java islands plus two Bali islands.

Examples of conservation forests are national parks, [nature preserves](#), wildlife reserves and nature parks. The differences between them are management objectives.

Under Indonesia's [1999 Forest Law](#), the objective of setting up conservation forests is to preserve natural habitat as well as biodiversity.

In short, most of these areas should be kept intact. Only a small amount of human intervention, such as traditional agricultural activities, are allowed in certain areas.

For basically, local community around [forest](#) is an inseparable part of forest management.

There are 6,381 villages—including 134 [indigenous communities](#)

—around Indonesian conservation areas, according to the [latest report](#).

And it is an undeniable fact that, for centuries, local people have been sustainably utilising forest resources, including for food, medicine and naturally for building houses.

In 2015, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry issued [a decree](#) on zone-based management in an attempt to resolve the conflict between conservation and livelihood. Areas in the conservation forests were divided into zones.

For instance, in utilisation zones people are allowed to continue their traditional farming activities. In religion zones, people are allowed to use the area for worship. Basically, the only area where people could not intervene is the core zone.

Ideally, this system ensures government can achieve its conservation agenda while accommodating local people's economic interests in a sustainable fashion.

## **What went wrong?**

On paper, the zone-based management seems to be a perfect way to serve the interests of both conservation and people's welfare.

But, in reality, conflicts between local people and conservation forests still occur.

For instance, in Tesso Nilo National Park in Riau province, people still [build illegal settlements and palm oil plantations](#) in areas where human activities are supposedly banned.

The park was established in 2004 to preserve Indonesia's charismatic

endangered species, Sumatran elephant (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*) and Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*). Yet it continues to be entangled in land conflicts.

Often [national parks](#) have limited resources to protect their vast conservation areas.

To put this challenge into perspective, only 142 staff must manage 1 million hectares of Gunung Leuser National Park in Nanggroe Aceh Darusalam Province. This is the equivalent of one person managing 7,000 hectares. And this is not a rare case for conservation forests.

Local communities also find it difficult to join the state's conservation effort, due to a lack of understanding and collaboration with authorities, which then drives the forest degradation.

As of 2015, [30% of conservation forests were damaged](#) because people encroached on them.

## **Not all bad**

Zone-based management is not a surefire solution to solve land conflicts.

To make sure [local communities](#) support government conservation efforts, the government should continue to involve local people in determining zones within conservation forests.

I can speak from [personal experience](#) when I helped zones revision at Kelimutu National Park of East Nusa Tenggara province.

That time, local people [felt robbed](#) because the state had established a particular area, a place of local ritual activity, as a conservation forest area.

Eventually, after a series of consultations between the local people and the management unit, they won the right to hold ritual ceremonies in that part of the conservation forest, which is now dubbed a cultural zone.

Another effort is the Conservation Partnership ([Kemitraan Konservasi](#)) scheme. It requires conservation management to actively collaborate with local people to manage forest.

For instance, in [Meru Betiri National Park in East Java](#) the park rangers collaborate with local people to develop non-timber forest products, especially durian fruits.

Hence, collaboration between stakeholders—government institutions, private companies, and NGOs—are essential for [conservation](#) forests.

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