

COVID-19, public ignorance and democratic decline chipping away at conservation

June 16 2021, by Dirk Tomsa and Ken M.p. Setiawan



Deforestation in a village called Salena in Palu, Central Sulawesi, during the pandemic. Credit: ANTARAFOTO/Basri Marzuki/hp., [CC BY](#)

Studies examining how the pandemic has affected the environment around the globe have produced [mixed results](#).

Among some good news, for instance, lockdown measures worldwide have resulted in reduced greenhouse gas emissions and better air quality.

On the other hand, a [European Environment Agency](#) report noted a surge in the use of single-use plastics and growing pressures on the capacity of global recycling systems throughout 2020.

Meanwhile, many [protected and conserved areas](#) around the world—as well as communities that depend on these areas for their livelihoods—have suffered from the collapse in eco-tourism and [government support](#) for [conservation programs](#).

Similar contrasting trends can also be observed in Indonesia, one of the most biodiverse countries in the world.

What is particularly worrying in the case of Indonesia is that these COVID-related issues are accompanied not only by a lack of environmental awareness but also by the country's recent downward slide toward an [increasingly illiberal](#) form of democracy.

The combined impact of these forces hampers Indonesia's prospects for better environmental policies in the post-pandemic era.

Minor gains, worrying new threats due to COVID-19

Like elsewhere, the pandemic has produced a mix of positive and negative consequences for the environment in Indonesia.

On the one hand, the country [reduced its deforestation rate](#) in 2020. This was a result of both the global economic downturn and policies such as moratoriums and forestry programs.

The Ministry of Environment and Forestry said the rate dropped by 75% from 2019. It was claimed to be the "lowest deforestation figure" Indonesia has ever achieved.

At the same time, however, the government has announced controversial plans for a new [food estate program](#). The program would allow large-scale conversion of protected forest areas into farmland.



A palm oil plantation worker carries crops in Jambi. Credit: ANTARA FOTO/Wahdi Septiawan/foc/16.

[Hunting and poaching](#) by residents living near forests and [national parks](#) also increased during the pandemic due to economic hardship.

As eco-tourism activities ground to a halt and national parks rangers reduced their patrols, more and more villagers ventured into protected areas to hunt wild animals for meat.

These new threats compound a broad range of institutional, structural and cultural factors that already hindered conservation efforts in Indonesia long before the pandemic.

These include loopholes in the country's environmental protection laws, rent-seeking practices by [palm oil and timber industries](#), and cultural traditions such as the [keeping of songbirds](#) as pets. All of these things pose huge threats to biodiversity.

Safe with our indifference?

The fact that COVID-19 is an animal-to-human virus widely believed to have originated in a Chinese wildlife market has done little to change perceptions about the environment in Indonesia, especially regarding the links between biodiversity and [public health](#).

In late 2020, we commissioned a public opinion survey by a prominent Indonesian polling institute to find out more about Indonesians' attitudes to wildlife conservation.

For the survey, 1,200 randomly selected respondents from all over the country were asked, among other questions, whether they were aware and/or concerned that many animals sold at Indonesian markets are threatened or endangered.

Only a minority of 43.9% said they were both aware and concerned. Another 16.3% said they were aware of the issue but not concerned. And 9.8% were neither aware nor concerned.

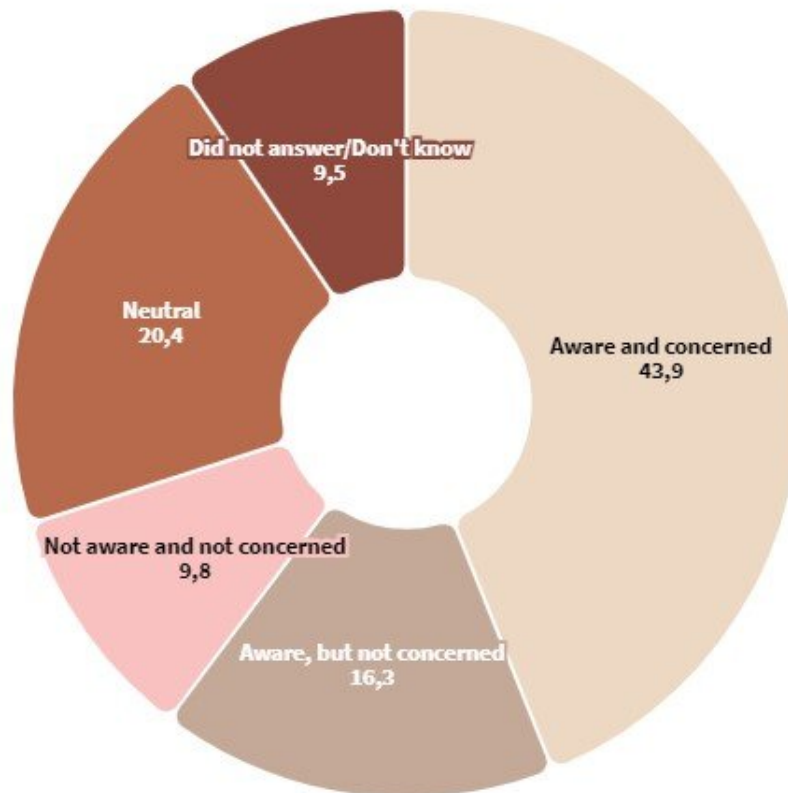
These numbers indicate an urgent need to raise awareness about the long-term costs of biodiversity loss and continued environmental destruction.

Better education is needed to achieve this. However, the national school curriculum and textbooks for high school students contain little to no [environmental education](#).

Instead, religion and character education take up most space in the curriculum. This emphasis reflects an excessive focus on moral and nationalist values in Indonesia's education system.

Attitudes toward selling endangered animals on markets (%)

1,200 randomly selected respondents from all over the country



Credit: Tomsa & Setiawan (2020)

The illiberal turn as the ultimate threat

Beyond pandemic-related environmental damage and low public awareness of conservation issues, the recent decline in democratic quality poses another new set of challenges to environmental protection.

The government has shown a growing [tendency to silence dissent](#) and prosecute its critics. This has made it increasingly difficult to speak out, for instance, against corrupt practices in the forestry sector or the negative effects of infrastructure projects on the environment.

The twin forces of [populism and Islamic conservatism](#)—on the rise since the mid-2010s—present another challenge.

By spawning a popular anti-science narrative, these movements not only impeded Indonesia's [response to COVID-19](#), but also led to government interference in critical research on deforestation and forest fires.

Changes to the structure of the Corruption Eradication Commission in 2019 and the passing of the controversial Omnibus Law on Job Creation in 2020 are also likely to have dire consequences for the environment.

The anti-corruption agency lost many of the powers it once used so effectively to expose [corruption and collusion in the forestry sector](#).

The Omnibus Law has severely [weakened environmental regulation](#) and restricted avenues for civil society to challenge environmentally problematic projects.

All in all, the combination of long-existing problems and new trends spells trouble for Indonesia's environment in the post-pandemic era.

Indonesia urgently needs to reverse its downward trajectory toward

illiberal democracy, not only to save its democratic legacy but also to enable better protection of the country's unique natural heritage.

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