

Conservation in Indonesia is at risk, say scientists who study the region

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Indonesia, home to the largest tropical rainforest in Southeast Asia and over 17,500 islands, is a country packed with biodiversity and endangered species. However, scientists studying the region's species and ecosystems are getting banned from Indonesia, and conservation plans are being blocked.

In a letter published in the journal *Current Biology* on July 10, a team of conservation researchers with long-term experience in Indonesia discuss scientific suppression and other research challenges they have witnessed while working in the region. They offer suggestions for how to promote [nature conservation](#), protect data transparency, and share research with the public in this and other regions of the world.

"If you look at a heat map of the Earth, and where [endangered species](#) are located, Indonesia and that general region are just off the charts," says tropical environmental scientist William F. Laurance of James Cook University, who has been doing research on the environmental impacts of development in Southeast Asia for over a decade.

Laurance and his co-authors say they felt drawn to raise awareness about the issues facing conservation in Indonesia because during their time working in the region, they witnessed many instances when governments and corporations impeded research—including their own.

For example, they write in the letter, in 2022, five leading conservation researchers were banned from working in Indonesia on the premise that they had "negative intentions" to "discredit the government."

The researchers reference papers about [forest conservation](#) and wildlife management in Sumatra, for which the teams had multiple colleagues from Indonesia decline co-authorship "out of concerns that it might adversely impact their funding, research permits, or opportunities for commercial contracts in Indonesia."

"The researchers said, 'Well, no, you can't tell that story, even though it's true, and you can't identify me or include all the relevant details.' And this just kept happening over and over again. 'It's a climate of fear,'" says Laurance.

To protect [environmental research](#) in Indonesia and the contributors who work on it, Laurance and his team suggest that organizations funding research in the region require data transparency for studies that they support. They also recommend the implementation and usage of online "safe houses" (whistleblower websites designed to protect anonymity and information leakage) and anonymized journals (publications in which contributors are not named).

They say these interventions could help researchers get information out to the public without worrying about the consequences of being personally tied to their findings.

The authors do note that several organizations are advocating for change, especially in Indonesia. Some examples of these groups include the Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom and the Jakarta Legal Aid Foundation, which are organizing to support [conservation](#) and thwart efforts to silence researchers. They also note that "scientific suppression is by no means unique to Indonesia."

"I think scientists have a really serious responsibility to try to communicate what's going on in the world. What's happening here is a bigger problem than gets talked about," said Laurance. "There needs to be a way to get information out, but scientists in many countries are seriously struggling."

More information: William F Laurance, For Indonesia and beyond, nature conservation needs independent science, *Current Biology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.cub.2023.04.068](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2023.04.068). [www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822\(23\)00550-X](https://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(23)00550-X)

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