

How a paper company is restoring tropical forest in Sumatra 26 June 2019

Wildlife thrives in one of Sumatra's largest intact peatland forests, and an unlikely coalition of NGOs and businesses is ensuring it remains that way.



An aerial view of a river in Riau Province where APRIL is restoring 150,000 ha of degraded peat forest. Image: Caine Delacy/ APRIL

Amid recent reports of an increasing crisis in global biodiversity caused by habitat loss, land conversion for agriculture, climate change and pollution, an ecosystem restoration programme based in Indonesia has reported a win for wildlife.

Called Restorasi Ekosistem Riau (RER), it recorded an increase in its biodiversity list within its forest restoration area in the 150,000ha of peat forest it is restoring on the Kampar Peninsula and Padang Island in Riau Province, Sumatra.

Several species classified as globally threatened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) recorded were found in the area, which is one of the largest remaining Sundaic lowland Tropical peat forests in Sumatra.

According to RER's recently published Progress Report 2018, the number of unique plant and animal species recorded in the area grew from 717 in 2017 to 759 in 2018, including the critically endangered helmeted hornbill and Sumatran tiger.

Established in 2013 by pulp and paper company, APRIL, RER is supported by partners Fauna & Flora International, and local non-government organisations (NGOs) BIDARA and Laskar Alam.

Remarking on progress since RER's founding, advisory board chair, Bey Soo Khiang, acknowledges the growing global recognition of ecosystem restoration as a strategy to mitigate the impact of climate change and protect biodiversity.

Ecosystem restoration refers to the process of assisting the recovery of a forest area that has been degraded, damaged or destroyed. RER's model is based on a four-phase approach that works to protect, assess, restore, and manage the area.

"The United Nations' recent declaration of a Decade of Ecosystem Restoration commencing in 2021, to restore 350 million hectares of degraded land by 2030, sends the strongest signal yet that ecosystem restoration is not only critical to the reduction in global greenhouse gas emissions, it also has a vital role to play as an agent of biodiversity recovery and sustainable development," says Bey.

Supported by ecosystem restoration licences issued by the Indonesian government for a 60-year period, the restoration area is approximately the size of London. It experienced decades of degradation through commercial and illegal logging by private businesses and local communities, impacting the area's forest structure and composition of tree species.

Larger trees were taken from the area and networks of canals were built to provide access to locations deep within the peat forest and transport logs. The drainage canals reduced water levels, threatening natural forest growth and increasing the risk of fire.

At the same time, over 6,700 natural seedlings from 70 different tree species were planted across 58ha of degraded forest during 2018, bringing the total replanted area to 88.5ha.

The progress report also highlights work with communities living near the restoration area. During the year, the restoration programme supported eight community groups to maintain and create noburn vegetable farms, as well as piloting a catfish aquaculture programme on Palau Padang. The first fish harvest in September 2018 generated additional income for the community.

RER advisory board chairman Bey commented: "Over the past five years, we have collectively assembled a wealth of insight and knowledge. This head-start provides us with an opportunity to share [with the world] our experience, specifically in relation to peatland hydrology restoration and carbon measurement, and engaging communities as restoration partners".

"Through communication and knowledge sharing we hope we can contribute to a global programme of lasting significance," he added. Taking a consultative approach ensures that land managers, decision makers and local communities are part of the process of design, conservation target setting and implementation."

Source: <u>https://www.eco-business.com/news/how-a-paper-company-is-restoring-tropical-forest-in-sumatra/</u>