



## Eco-Business

**Wanted: Young Indonesians for next generation of forest defenders.**

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When Indonesian civil servant Dwi Bangun isn't sat at her desk in Jakarta or stuck in the capital's notorious traffic jams, she can be found barefoot on the nearby coastline, wading through the water to plant mangroves.

The 30-year-old volunteers with [Hutan Itu Indonesia](#) (Forest Is Indonesia), an innovative green group that connects young city dwellers, teaches them about the importance of the nation's forests and encourages them to get involved in conservation.

"If you know Paris, you will see the Eiffel Tower and if you know New York, you will see the Statue of Liberty - but when people hear about Indonesia, what do they know?" said Dwi, who lives in Tangerang, a city on the outskirts of Jakarta.

"It should be our forests. We have such rich forests."

Biodiversity-rich Indonesia has a third of the world's rainforests but they have come under increased threat in recent decades due to the clearing and planting of crops like palm oil, as well as mining, pulp and paper expansion, and urbanisation.

Destroying forests hurts global goals to curb climate change, as trees suck up a third of the planet-warming emissions produced globally, but release carbon when they rot or are burned.

While Indonesia's deforestation rates have slowed in recent years - attributed to stricter policies and better forest fire control - the country was still ranked fourth globally for [primary tropical forest loss](#) in 2022 by the nonprofit World Resources Institute (WRI), at 230,000 hectares (568,000 acres).

Worried about deforestation and a lack of youth engagement, Hutan Itu Indonesia, which was established in 2016, is raising awareness and engagement in various ways - from organising music concerts and forest treks to creating art and short films.

“(It) is like a big experiment ... how we can bring the people, especially youths, to raise awareness about the forests and the importance of keeping it intact,” said Hutan Itu Indonesia’s co-founder Andre Christian, a video producer.

While many young people in Jakarta - a mega-city of 10 million residents - care about environmental issues like recycling or air pollution, the urban disconnect from nature means forest restoration and conservation are a lower priority.

A 2015 survey by consulting firm Daemeter found that many Indonesians - especially younger citizens - had little awareness about or interest [in the country’s forests](#).

And a YouGov global poll found Indonesia had the world’s highest proportion of [climate change deniers at 18 per cent](#), as of 2019.

Green groups say climate activists have often been vilified by government officials and extractive industries, claiming that [environmentalists hold back economic growth](#).

“Engaging young people in forest conservation is crucial for the sustainable management of these natural resources,” said Arief Wijaya, a program director at WRI Indonesia.

### **Fun runs, music concerts, films and fine dining**

Dwi wanted to make a difference starting from around 2016, following a particularly bad year for forests fires and haze.

Frustrated by many green groups’ dull or downbeat efforts to tackle Indonesia on environmental destruction, she saw social media posts advertising a forest-themed fun run in Jakarta organised by Hutan Itu Indonesia.

“Normally, I’d see (coverage) that the ... forest was on fire but they did it in a different way with a positive campaign,” Dwi said.

Instead of receiving medals, runners who completed the fun run were awarded adopted trees on Indonesia’s Sumatra island.

Subsequent events organised by Hutan Itu Indonesia include concerts involving musicians who wrote songs based on their visits to a rainforest, art exhibitions and film screenings, and a fine dining event using ingredients foraged from forests.

The group is now active in eight Indonesian provinces - relying heavily on youth volunteers, who are helped to set up their own green initiatives and given the opportunity to visit forests, go on treks and take part in restoration projects.

“What is going to drive Indonesia to become a better country? The youth,” said co-founder Christian.

“(They) are the future.”

Such initiatives can help young urbanites understand how forests are vital to sustain lives across society, and how local communities - located far from cities - play a key role in protecting natural resources, according to Toerris Jaeger, director of the Oslo-based NGO Rainforest Foundation Norway.

“The fact that Indonesia has managed to reduce the rate of deforestation should give hope to the next generation that yes, it is possible to turn the tide on forest loss,” he said.

### **Celebrities and shoemaker support conservation project**

In 2020, Hutan Itu Indonesia organised a three-day boot camp just outside Jakarta for young people on how to protect forests.

Dwi was one of about 50 young people - including students - to attend the event, where she started work to establish her own green group, “Forest Is Our Friend”, to boost forest and nature awareness, be it online or at schools, among youths.

Getting involved in several mangrove planting projects, Dwi helped campaign for Hutan Itu Indonesia’s new mangrove project on Harapan Island (“Hope Island”), which is part of a string of islands known as Thousand Islands, north of Jakarta.

With no cars, the estimated 200 families who live on Harapan use motorbikes and bicycles to get around its narrow streets, forging a living by providing accommodation, eco-tourism and island-hopping activities for tourists, or by fishing.

Hutan Itu Indonesia's mangrove planting project on Harapan relies on online donations and corporate collaborations, one of which is with shoemaker Cole Haan Indonesia. The company has a scheme of adopting mangroves linked to shoes sold in Indonesia.

Locals help with planting at the project, which was launched in June supported by Indonesian celebrities like actor Marcel Chandrawinata and models the Valerie twins.

Jakarta residents seeking a city break often visit Harapan and the surrounding islands to enjoy nature, see turtles and plant mangroves that contribute to keeping fish stocks high and offer protection against extreme weather and high tides.

Against a backdrop of fishing boats and luxury yachts, Dwi said it takes about one to two hours to plant between 1,000 and 2,000 mangroves in the shallow, muddy water - with dozens of young barefoot volunteers forming a line along the shore.

"You have to know about the wind and waves, then find the right mangrove compatible with the area ... it's easy for them to die," Dwi said, adding it usually takes about six months to know whether a planted mangrove will survive.

Indonesia is home to the [world's largest area of mangroves](#) - which can absorb four to five times more carbon emissions than landed tropical forests - and launched a scheme in 2021 to restore 600,000 hectares (1.5 million acres) of degraded areas by 2024.

Mangrove restoration is a priority for Indonesian President Joko Widodo - and Dwi sees young people as vital for the country's forests to thrive in the coming years.

"This kind of activity is fun (for youths) - getting into the water and getting wet with the mud," she said.

"They will post (online) about it and this will create a domino effect with other young people."

Source: <https://www.eco-business.com/news/wanted-young-indonesians-for-next-generation-of-forest-defenders/>