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Women in Sumatra help preserve World Heritage forest to build food security

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Members of farmers group Maju Bersama, Liswanti (left), Lisnawati (second left), Herawati and Purwani pose with 'kecombrang' (torch ginger) harvested from the Kerinci Seblat National Park in Bengkulu in December 2019. (JP/Dedek Hendry)

Four members of the Environment Care Women's Group (KPPL) Maju Bersama in Pal VIII village, Rejang Lebong regency, Bengkulu, walked slowly through the Kerinci Seblat National Park (TNKS) to look for food.

The four women – Purwani, Herawati, Liswanti and Lisnawati – looked carefully through the bushes in the park's traditional utilization zone in search of *kecombrang* (torch ginger).

TNKS is an ASEAN Heritage Park and a UNESCO World Heritage Site alongside Gunung Leuseur and Bukit Barisan parks in Sumatra. Together, the three

parks, covering 2.5 million hectares, form the UNESCO Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra site.

“We will use today’s harvest as a side dish for the offering ceremony at the house of the group’s chairperson,” Lisnawati said as she cut a *kecombrang* flower from its stalk.

Side dishes made of *kecombrang* are served both for regular meals and for social and religious events.

“They are not only delicious but also good for your health,” said Lisnawati, adding that eating *kecombrang* regularly could help prevent cervical and breast cancer among women.

A 2011 study on *kecombrang* found the plant was a source of antioxidants. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3069941/>

According to Environment and Forestry Ministry data, as of the end of November 2019, 6,112 groups across Indonesia had the rights to manage a total of 3.43 million ha of forests under the government’s social forestry program. KPPL Maju Bersama was among the first groups to receive such rights. The group and the TNKS center signed the partnership cooperation agreement in March 2019.

The TNKS covers an area of 1,389,510 ha in Bengkulu, Jambi, West Sumatra and South Sumatra provinces. In Bengkulu alone it covers 348,841 ha across Rejang Lebong, Lebong, North Bengkulu and Mukomuko regencies.

Members of farmers group Maju Bersama stand near a sign telling people to stay out of their cultivation area. (JP/Dedek Hendry)

As a conservation partner of the TNKS, KPPL Maju Bersama, which has 20 members, has the rights to harvest and cultivate *pakis* (ferns) and *kecombrang* in the forest in the village and is also responsible for helping to preserve the area to build food security.



“The money earned will be distributed to all members of the group to meet their daily needs,” said Purwani. She added that preserving the TNKS was important for the village’s food security, especially for farmers, as damage to the forests would affect the fertility and productivity of their plantations. “Forests are water suppliers, climate guardians, fertility maintainers and habitats for pollinators,” Purwani said.

The success of KPPL Maju Bersama’s management of the forest saw the Asia Foundation invite the group’s members to speak and share their experience with others during a talk show on the role of women in social forestry for food security. “After Bengkulu, a women’s group in Aceh also received rights to manage a forest area,” Asia Foundation Setapak II project officer Margaretha Tri Wahyungsih said in Jakarta recently. According to Margaretha, there were three factors that prevented other women’s groups from receiving such rights. Namely, the limited knowledge of many women about their rights over forests, the limited number of supervisors to help them get their rights and a lack of policies that support women’s groups. “Unfortunately, regional administrations have yet to realize the importance of such rights for women, especially in maintaining food security,” Margaretha said.