

Borneo on the brink: Of rainforests and robber barons

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Indonesian plywood is the cheapest to cut and transport. Logging in Indonesia and protests by the Dayaks and other indigenous people of Indonesia are examined. Environmental activism is also becoming stronger in the Philippines.

Full Text (5497 words)

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We see our first of the famed Indonesian hardwood trees not in a rainforest but transformed into a sheet of plywood in our hotel in Pontianak. On the Indonesian side of the vast island of Borneo, Pontianak calls itself the "equator city." It sits at the mouth of Indonesia's longest river, the Kapuas, which winds its way to the coast from deep within Borneo's vast tropical rainforests. For us, it quickly becomes hard to think of Pontianak as anything but "plywood city."

The plywood we see in our hotel is not the uneven, streaked, and knotty version produced in the United States from softwoods such as pine. Pontianak's plywood is beautiful--a smooth and knot-free sheet with a flawless grain, from the family of hardwoods known as Philippine mahogany. We show the sheet to the man with whom we are meeting, one of Borneo's indigenous Dayaks. He sighs and then says, "First they steal our Dayak forests.

Then they sell it back to us."

Walk into one of the big chains of home improvement stores found across the United States, and you will be greeted by miles of Borneo's plywood in a variety of forms. You can buy it by the sheet, in shades ranging from straw to reddish brown. You can buy it made into inexpensive furniture: that is Indonesian plywood on the backs of the bookcases (and, in non-plywood form, that is undoubtedly Indonesian nyatoh wood in those moderately priced bedframes and picture frames). Walk a few aisles further to the kitchen section, and you can find it in the interiors of cheap cabinets.

Look inside a recreational vehicle. Much of its interior structure is likely to be Indonesian plywood. Visit a large Hollywood set. Despite protests by U.S. environmentalists, most studios still rely on Indonesian plywood--not because it is the best choice for the purpose, but because, even with the cost of cutting, milling, gluing, and transporting around the globe, it is the cheapest.

Lauan plywood is the United States' major import from tropical forests, and Indonesia is by far the largest supplier," says Greenpeace's Pamela Wellner, author of *The Wood User's Guide*. "If it was more expensive, it probably wouldn't be used for any of these purposes."

This flood of cheap plywood is being cut from one of the most ecologically significant tropical rainforests remaining in the world. Indonesia's 13,000 islands are neck-and-neck with Zaire and second to Brazil in total acreage of rainforest. The forests on these islands host a myriad of endemic flora and fauna; Indonesia ranks first in number of known mammal species and a close third behind Brazil and Colombia in total number of known animal species. Kalimantan, the Indonesian sector of Borneo, harbors 800 kinds of orchids, 40,000 known plant species, and dozens of the animals and plants that have come to symbolize the living riches of the tropical rainforest: orangutan, king cobra, rafflesia (the world's largest flower), proboscis monkey, clouded leopard.

Yet these forests have begun to suffer the same fate as those of large tracts of the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and Asia in centuries and decades past. Today, Indonesia is second only to Brazil in the area of forest that is destroyed every year. Indeed, the number of endangered species of mammals and birds in Indonesia surpasses that of all other countries on earth.

More than in any other nation, then, the future of the world's tropical forests will be determined in Brazil and Indonesia. And Kalimantan, which has 28 percent of Indonesia's land mass and Southeast Asia's largest contiguous expanse of rainforest, will be a pivotal site as the history of the last great tropical forests is played out.

This is why we have come to Pontianak. Most Western environmentalists are at least vaguely aware of the forest losses in the Brazilian Amazon, but Indonesia's rainforest drama has occurred largely off-camera.

We have come here with urgent questions: Can the destruction of Indonesia's rainforests be stopped before it is too late? Can the Dayaks and other local groups challenge the loggers? And, given the extent of U.S. imports, can environmentalists and consumers in the United States play any role?

So that we may begin finding the answers to these questions, our Dayak friend invites us to travel inland with him, from Pontianak to the heart of the rainforest, a journey in reverse of that taken by the plywood. It is a courageous offer. Indonesia is a military dictatorship that represses, imprisons, and even kills environmental and other activists, and "Ruben"--a pseudonym--has risked his safety simply by meeting us in Pontianak. A slight, handsome man in his early thirties, who has taught himself proficient and often elegant English, Ruben believes that the Dayaks are the last line of defense against the destruction of Indonesia's rainforests. He is willing to serve as our guide and translator in order to show us the Dayaks' predicament firsthand.

Dayak is the collective name for Borneo's diverse array of indigenous communities. About a quarter of the 12 million people in Borneo are Dayak; in the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan, where we are travelling, Dayaks constitute as much as 40 percent of the population. They live, for the most part, in villages scattered throughout Borneo's vast forests--villages so far apart, and with so few roads, that it can take days by boat to reach a city. Although they are numerous, the isolated Dayaks wield little influence in Borneo compared to the urban population. In Indonesia as a whole, with its 185 million people and its culture and politics dominated by Java and the Javanese, the Dayaks are still more marginalized.

A van, a motorcycle, a foot path, and a day later we reach a Dayak village deep in the rainforest. The forest impresses us not so much in the towering height of the trees, but in their slender trunks and roots that snake along the surface of the topsoil. From an airplane, one sees an even canopy of the taller trees, some reaching 200 feet in height. From the dark and humid forest floor, the tops of these giants are obscured by shorter trees and by vines and other plants that climb toward the canopy. Birds chirp above (Indonesia hosts a sixth of the world's bird species); the ground, relatively free of leaves, has in part been conquered by armies of ants.

Ruben has brought us to this village in time to witness a three-day giving-of-thanks ceremony, a ritual so sacred that few liadn (or shaman, the Dayak's traditional religious leader) know how to perform it. We enter one of the houses, joining a crowded room of what appears to be the whole village and then some. Western dress predominates. Although a few pairs of curious eyes are focused on us, the center of attention is the shaman who has come from a nearby village.

He is an elderly man, small and sinewy. A sprig of leaves juts out of the red cloth that swathes his head; a crimson banner wraps his bare chest. Often appearing oblivious to the eighty or so villagers crammed into the room where we sit (and the dozens more peering in from the paneless windows and doors), he dances around the floor, at times seemingly in a trance. Local musicians drum bronze gongs on either side of the room, trying to keep

pace with the shaman's every mood. A younger apprentice mimics his motions like a shadow.

The ritual begins with a healing ceremony for the sick and will continue with storytelling, prayers, and incantations for seventy-two hours. To us, it is striking how completely this sacred ritual depends on the rainforest. "For the ceremony come bamboo, certain grasses, and plants from the forest," explains one of the Dayak men. "Look at the shaman's medicines. The plants he chews into a paste and spits onto some of the sick as part of the curing, the leaves he uses as a brush to sprinkle the holy water--these are from forest plants." And, as part of the ceremony, "the shaman sings about the souls of ancestors dwelling in the sacred places in the forest."

In the words of ethnobotanist Mark Plotkin: shamans are "the repositories of the most detailed tribal lore of curative plants....[T]hey are our greatest hope for finding cures to incurable diseases."

However, another young Dayak continues, the forests are important for other purposes besides religion and medicine. Wild game lives in the forest, and the Dayaks clear areas within the rainforest for their crops. Because topsoil in a tropical rainforest is very thin, the Dayaks rotate their fields every few years so that the forests can return.

Indeed, we are told, the Dayaks understand the ways of the forest so well that each village has its own managed forests (called tembawang) where, alongside the hardwoods, they have planted rubber trees, fruit trees, tengkawang trees that produce butter used in chocolate, and other trees valued for their gum, resins, dyes, or bark. To us, parts of the tembawang look remarkably like virgin rainforest. Professional foresters we will speak with later praise them as well-managed forests with substantial biodiversity. Through forest management, shifting cultivation, and careful use of forest plants and animals, small Dayak villages have historically been able to live sustainably off large areas of land.

But all is not well with the Dayak forests in this area of Borneo. In the past three decades, the incursion of logging, agricultural plantations, and government-sponsored migrants from the overpopulated islands of Java and Bali have begun to take their toll on the way of life that sustains Dayak communities. Commercial timber concessions criss-cross ancestral lands, superseding the Dayak tribal law or adat. Sacred areas have been destroyed. With large-scale logging come bulldozers and new roads that slice through the rainforest. This, one Dayak leader tells us, has led to erosion and heavy siltation of the streams and rivers near his village; the water has become undrinkable, and fish catches have plummeted.

Indonesia ranks behind China, India, and the United States as the world's fourth most populous nation. It is one of the few countries that have come close, during this century, to making the leap from a poor agrarian society to a wealthier industrialized one. At first, the engine was an abundant supply of oil. Since the early 1970s, Indonesia has channeled revenues from the government oil company into roads, electrification, and public

education--although the Dayak areas we visit have hardly benefitted.

As oil prices declined in the 1980s, the government shifted gears and is now attempting to tie growth to two other resources Indonesia has in abundance: cheap forests and repressed labor. With the help of giant Japanese trading companies, U.S. home-product companies, and firms like Nike and Levi Strauss, Indonesia is exploiting its forests and labor to become the plywood, sneaker, and apparel capital of the world. Today, Indonesia is the world's number one exporter of plywood and other processed wood products. The majority of that plywood comes from Kalimantan. After Japan, the United States is the second biggest market for Indonesia's exports, including its plywood. In any given recent year, the United States has received between one-seventh and one-fifth of Indonesia's rapidly growing plywood exports.

This shift in Indonesia's strategy from oil toward wood products and light manufactures has far-reaching implications for the Dayaks, the rest of Indonesia--and the world.

We see the physical transformation for ourselves when we travel farther inland in the province of West Kalimantan. In mini-planes, mini-buses, and boats, we follow the winding Kapuas River to visit the various links in the production chain of Indonesian logging. Only from a small airplane high above the river do we begin to grasp the dimensions of the logging concession areas, which stretch over tens of thousands of lush forest hectares to cover more than 43 percent of West Kalimantan's total land.

Indonesia's president, General Suharto, carved these concessions out of Kalimantan beginning in 1967. As with the forests on the other so-called "outer islands" (those other than Java, Madura, and Bali), Suharto handed over concessions as patronage to top military officials who were loyal to him in the extremely bloody coup that brought his military dictatorship to power. Unable to manage the concessions by themselves, the generals forged links to a handful of Indonesian businessmen (mostly of Chinese ancestry) who had also supported Suharto, and, initially, to foreign multinationals. Today, there are some 584 forest concessions covering about 65 million hectares in Indonesia, concentrated in the hands of only fifty conglomerates.

The forest king in Kalimantan and in several of Indonesia's outer islands is Prajogo Pangestu, a self-made billionaire who started out as a mini-bus driver on the coastal road of West Kalimantan. His meteoric rise in the logging industry was propelled by close ties he cultivated with Marubeni, Mitsubishi, and other giant trading companies that bring plywood to Japan (where it serves primarily as disposable construction molds for houses), the United States, and other countries.

Today, Prajogo is believed to control more forest concession land than any other individual on earth. According to a commonly cited estimate, his Barito Pacific Timber Group has some 5.5 million hectares of forest concession--an area, Prajogo is said to have boasted, "wider than Switzerland." Indonesian law, designed to increase the country's foreign-exchange earnings, Prajogo and other forest concessionaires must also be

involved in timber processing. Barito Pacific cuts and mills enough trees across Indonesia to keep Prajogo's sixty-eight plywood plants operating at full speed. Nearly one-fifth of Indonesia's plywood exports come from those plants.

Like that of other big logging concessionaires, Prajogo's reach extends beyond forest products. As we fly up the river, we cross patches of land that were logged years ago and are now plantations of rubber and palm oil and industrial tree estates. Such conversion from forests to agricultural crops is legal in designated "conversion forests." However, one of Ruben's Dayak friends tells us, "land conversion--to timber plantations or palm oil plantations--is even more destructive than logging," due to a host of problems that includes the introduction of agrichemicals and the complete clearing of lands with thin topsoil.

Most of our flight path is still forested. In the areas being actively logged, roads have been bulldozed for transporting cut trees to the Kapuas. The trees are roped together to float in vast log armadas to Pontianak. Given the length of the river and its frequent turns, the voyage can take weeks; in the wet season, almost the entire length of the Kapuas is said to be filled with logs.

We see these rainforest logs again days later when, back in Pontianak, we charter a small boat to the plywood plants that line the city's rivers. There we find thousands of these majestic logs, floating in mass river graves. Swallows dive overhead as giant cranes reach out into the river to load some of the logs onto ships and others into the factories, where they are sawn into timber or sliced and glued into plywood.

Since Kalimantan's forests are finite, Prajogo's strategy for his drive to the Fortune 500 is diversification. The profits from his millions of hectares of forest concession and his dozens of plywood mills are feeding an ambitious expansion into plantations, pulp and paper, and petrochemicals. As is the norm for Indonesia's giant conglomerates, Prajogo uses his ties to the president to maximum advantage. He has joined forces with Suharto's second son to build a \$1.8 billion petrochemical factory, and with Suharto's oldest daughter to build one of the world's largest pulp mills.

Prajogo's close ties to the Suharto family also come in handy in other ways. In 1991, for example, the Indonesian government tried to fine Barito Pacific \$5.4 million for illegally logging outside a concession in Kalimantan. Prajogo's response was simply to refuse to pay; the case was never pursued.

In Ruben's province of West Kalimantan, the combination of forest concessions, agricultural plantations, and new villages peoples by migrants from Java and Bali is reducing the area available to the Dayaks for shifting their farm plots. For us, one of the overriding questions is how effectively the Dayaks will be able to protect their forests.

Our research and travel over more than a decade and a half in the nearby Philippine island of Mindanao (see page 25) have led us to believe that the poor are most likely to be sparked to environmental action when three conditions exist: environmental degradation

threatens the resource base that is the source of their livelihood; they have a sense of permanence on that land or resource base; and they belong to active citizens' organizations.

At the current rate of cutting in Indonesia, it will take several decades to reach the Philippines' level of deforestation; at this stage, therefore, few people's livelihoods are threatened. This may partly explain why, in West Kalimantan and in Indonesia overall, local resistance to the ravages of the forest companies has been relatively minor. Unlike in the Philippines, "where the environmental situation is so desperate," explains a woman we will call Ami--a vivacious and articulate Indonesian environmentalist who has visited Mindanao--"here for the majority the logging does not have direct impacts yet. The biggest impact is siltation and losing their ancestral lands. But still, even if the logging company gets their land, they can move to another area. In Mindanao, there's nowhere to go. They have to fight."

Ruben adds, "In my area, there was no resistance because people did not know the implications of commercial logging." But now, he continues, Dayaks are beginning to witness the ecological impact of commercial logging--silted streams and declining wildlife, floods and long droughts previously never seen in West Kalimantan. And, Ruben says, "now they're crying."

It is difficult for the Dayaks to channel their sorrow into action; organized citizen resistance is quite fragmented. Part of the problem is the sheer size of Borneo. "It's so hard to organize here...[given] the distance between villages. Here, the people feel lonely," Ami posits.

A critical factor is the tight control of the Suharto military. After three decades of dictatorship, as Ruben suggests, "The problem of the people here is that the political situation is very different from the Philippines. In Indonesia, we [citizens' organizations] have to find very smart ways to struggle. Otherwise the military will ban you....If you demonstrate or blockade, they will shoot you on the spot."

Such was the case in September of last year, when five hundred residents of several east Java villages demonstrated to protest the construction of a dam that could flood over 700 hectares of their land. The military opened fire, and four people were killed.

All of these are formidable obstacles to change. Still, the millions of Dayaks and other indigenous Indonesians do feel deep bonds to their land and forests, and across Indonesia, one generation after the military coup, there are signs that citizen activism is once again finding its voice. In recent years, there have been protests against commercial logging activities in Irian Jaya, Siberut, Yamdena, and elsewhere.

Inhabitants of the small coral island of Yamdena, for instance, filed a series of complaints to the government when a 1991 logging concession violated a government decree that had supposedly made Yamdena a protected area. In 1992, frustrated by the lack of serious response, 400 people marched on the concession site. Three dozen were arrested. Yet,

thanks in part to Jakarta-based citizens' organizations and international groups that publicized the case--including the torture of some of those arrested--the government put a six-month freeze on logging operations on the island. The freeze was later lifted, but Yamdena's struggle continues.

There are other examples. Dayak leaders tell us of a protest against a World Bank-financed palm oil plantation that would have encroached upon a local community's forest. Campaigns in Sumatra and Irian Jaya are opposing the spread of pulp and paper mills and mining projects. In Jakarta, WALHI (Indonesian Forum for the Environment), a network of over a hundred environmental action groups, has begun legal actions to try to stop environmentally destructive projects. SKEPHI (Indonesian Non-Governmental Organization Network for Forest Conservation) has campaigned vocally against Barito Pacific's recent public offering of its stock.

In short, Indonesian citizen groups may be quieter and more careful than those of the Philippines--but they are not silent. In Kalimantan, Dayak groups organizing around social and environmental issues are still in their infancy. But they are beginning to establish links to the larger Jakarta-based environmental groups and networks, which have been quite responsive to indigenous communities' concerns.

The precarious position of the indigenous and larger national groups that are trying to carve out a political niche in the midst of repression puts an even greater responsibility on Western environmental organizations to forge links--carefully--to Indonesian environmental initiatives.

There have been several international campaigns on Indonesian environmental issues to date. Perhaps the best known was waged throughout the 1980s against Indonesia's transmigration scheme. This program used World Bank funding to resettle some 3.5 million poor from densely populated Java in Kalimantan and other outer islands--undermining local communities and their forests in the outer islands, while leaving many of the settlers in poverty. WALHI, SKEPHI, other national and local Indonesian organizations, and activists in more than ten countries convinced the World Bank to stop funding transmigration and focus instead on improving the existing sites. As Bruce Rich points out in *Mortgaging the Earth*, the fact that foreign activists were criticizing the World Bank allowed Indonesian groups to join in the campaign "without directly attacking the government."

Other recent examples include the success of U.S., international, and Indonesian organizations in winning some concessions from the Indonesian subsidiary of a U.S.-based mining firm, Freeport, which for twenty years had been dumping tailings from a huge open-pit copper mine directly into a river in Irian Jaya. Several foreign groups collaborated with WALHI, SKEPHI, and other groups in the late 1980s to stop the U.S. transnational firm, Scott Paper, from developing a huge pulp plantation in Irian Jaya. And Greenpeace, the Rainforest Action Network, and Earth First! have a campaign in progress to convince Hollywood studios to cease their use of Indonesian plywood in sets.

This international activity adds up in another way, according to SKEPHI: "The evidence that the world is training a watchful eye on the rainforests gives us a better bargaining position with the government and companies,"

Back in Jakarta, we hear another perspective from a business consultant for some of Indonesia's top domestic and foreign firms. Late one evening, he shares his doubts about the government's wisdom in placing so much emphasis on a strategy of cheap labor and cheap forests. Indonesia's "comparative advantage" in plywood, he muses, rests on the low costs of its key inputs: raw timber and the labor of loggers, truckers, and factory workers. At best, he suggests, it is a temporary advantage; Vietnam, for instance, has the capacity to offer firms minimum wages below Jakarta's (\$1.14 a day at the time of our Borneo trip) and perhaps even cheaper forest resources. Moreover, plywood exports, he notes, depend on construction booms in countries that are currently mired in recession.

His disquiet confirms one of the conclusions of our Kalimantan journey: the destruction of rainforests for plywood, pulp, and paper is not a workable path of development for Indonesia's outer islands. The logging is neither raising Indonesians' living standards nor contributing to overall economic development; only a small portion of the proceeds of forest products is returned to the government in taxes, and the industry creates few and primarily low-paying jobs. Rather, logging has led mainly to the enrichment of a privileged few like Prajogo.

Most Indonesians we meet who oppose continued forest destruction pose an alternative development model--not the opposite extreme of leaving the forests in a pristine state, but a middle ground: challenging the concession system on indigenous lands and enforcing the ancestral rights of indigenous peoples to manage their own lands. At the onset of the 21st century, this model is not one of a purely subsistence economy. Although many Dayak communities produce most of their food through their agriculture, non-timber tree products, fishing, and hunting, they entered the cash economy long ago, selling rubber, resin, rattan, and other tree products locally. If large-scale commercial logging can be stopped and indigenous communities gain greater control of their lands, many Dayaks have a "development model" already in place that can provide a better quality of life and raise living standards.

Meanwhile, Indonesia's current development strategy is a fragile one, heavily dependent on decisions made by corporations and consumers thousands of miles away. Indonesia is now part of a global labor pool; its forests are beginning to fall under the scrutiny of a global environmental movement. This reality opens the door to local/international environmental collaborations that could send strong signals to the Indonesian government that this unsustainable path cannot continue forever.

The United States is the world's largest consuming nation, constituting a staggering one-quarter of world markets. In a world where almost every nation is betting its economic fortune on exporting more, this fact places substantial leverage in the hands of U.S. consumers of, for instance, plywood and Nike sneakers. The challenge is to exercise this leverage, in consultation with Indonesian organizations, in a fashion that benefits citizens

and rainforests in Indonesia. Given the power that U.S. environmentalists can wield, collaboration requires a great deal of care and dialogue. It also requires dealing with issues that may seem at first quite unrelated to the environment: development models, trade militarization, and human rights.

Some U.S. labor rights activists, for example, have helped secure laws conditioning tariff-free entry of goods to the United States on respect for basic workers' rights in the exporting country: the right to form unions, to strike, and to receive the country's legal minimum wages. In collaboration with Indonesian labor activists, the U.S.-based International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund has filed petitions with the U.S. government, citing abuse of these rights at Nike and other factories in Indonesia. The pressure is leading to some positive changes, such as the 29 percent increase in the minimum wage announced in 1993.

U.S. environmentalists could press for similar conditions. They could also challenge the almost religious focus of the Clinton administration and the leading multilateral development institutions on promoting free trade and freer markets in the Southern Hemisphere. As we saw in West Kalimantan, freer markets are unlikely to help either the general population or the rainforest--because Prajogo Pangestu and the other forest products conglomerates are the market. Further freeing the market is synonymous with further strengthening Barito Pacific.

And finally, Western environmental groups must add human rights to their agendas. As Adrian W. DeWind said in *Defending the Earth*, a joint publication of NRDC and Human Rights Watch, "Suppression of dissent--often violent--is frequently employed by governments...to forestall public concern about environmental decay." In Indonesia, the brutal reality is that local environmental organizations may be shut down, or worse, if they are seen to be working with foreign groups.

And so in Kalimantan, the likely site of one of the great rainforest battles of the 21st century, the survival of the forest hinges ultimately on loosening the military grip on the Indonesian people, so that citizen organizations and the values they speak for can once again flourish.

REPRESSION AND BLOODSHED IN INDONESIA

The government of General Suharto was born in the mid-sixties in a bloodbath of genocide. Between 1945 and 1959, Indonesia had a healthy parliamentary democracy, and Indonesians created one of the most vibrant citizens movements in the world. Millions joined political parties and organizations of peasants, trade unionists, and women. After a period of turmoil during which up to a million Indonesians were massacred, Suharto seized power in 1967.

Since that time, the government has further built up the military, primarily as an agent of internal repression. Using information from Indonesia's efficient internal intelligence agency, the bloated military disrupts citizen organizations through attacks, arrests, and

other forms of intimidation.

The most brutal operations have taken place in East Timor. Portugal held Timor for almost three centuries; in 1974 the Portuguese pulled out, and a nationalist movement declared the independence of the eastern half of the island. Indonesia rejected the declaration. In December 1975 its military invaded and, in the ensuing three years, massacred 200,000 people--a third of the would-be nation. (Australian journalist John Pilger has recently revealed that the invasion was delayed several days at the urging of the U.S. government, so that visiting President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger could leave the country before it began.)

Miraculously, resistance continues against Indonesian rule in East Timor--as does the Suharto government's repression. As recently as November 1991, the government opened fire on a crowd of people in a cemetery in the capital city of Dili. Estimates of the number killed or "disappeared" run as high as 528.

The government has carried out another "secret war" against an independence movement in the heavily forested province of Irian Jaya. In general, according to the U.S. State Department, Indonesia is characterized by "extrajudicial killings, unfair trials of political prisoners, arbitrary arrests, torture, restrictions on basic freedoms and the inability of citizens to change their government."

Yet the United States has consistently voted for World Bank loans to Indonesia that average around \$1.6 billion every year--despite U.S. law requiring the United States not to support Bank loans to countries that are "gross" violators of human rights. U.S. environmental groups should press the U. S. Treasury Department to insist that the United States vote against multilateral loans to Indonesia until the country reins in its military and improves the human rights situation. The U.S. government should also ban further arms sales to the Indonesian government.

FOREST AND GRASSROOTS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Just to the northeast of Borneo, the southern Philippine island of Mindanao hosts a similar ecological base. And, like the Dayaks, its indigenous lumad population is being forced off ancestral lands by palm oil and fruit plantations. Indeed, when one of us first lived in Mindanao in 1977, the forest was extensive. But by the late 1980s, after more than a decade of virtually unchecked logging, most indigenous people had been pushed onto marginal and fragile lands, and the ecological destruction began to translate into economic decline for them and for the more recent lowland migrants.

It was at this point of extensive forest degradation that the grassroots environmental movement in Mindanao began to grow. In 1989, in the central Mindanao province of Bukidnon, corn and rice farmers showed us what happened as the forests in the mountains surrounding their fields were cut down; in the wet season, when the heavy rains arrived, mud from the logged hills flowed down onto their fields; and in the dry season, since trees also act like a sponge to hold in groundwater, their removal led to

rapid parching of the soil.

Motivated by the threat to their existence posed by the resulting fall in corn and rice yields, small-scale subsistence farmers in the town of San Fernando had taken decisive action in 1987. One morning, a group of about fifty sat down on the only road through town, beginning a two-week blockade of logging trucks. Though eventually dispersed by the military, the picket caught the attention of the press. A year later, the farmers moved their protest to the provincial capital and repeated the blockade. Despite government promises to cancel one of the two logging concessions in the area and order the other to cease logging in a critical watershed area, the cutting did not stop. In their continuing protest, a group from San Fernando travelled to Manila to conduct a hunger strike that culminated in a meeting with then-President Corazon Aquino, who agreed to their demands, including a ban on commercial logging in the area.

As decades of uncontrolled logging and destructive fishing techniques have adversely affected the livelihoods of millions of Filipinos, environmental activism of the San Fernando variety has cropped up in a number of areas across the Philippine archipelago. At the same time, organizations of farmers and fishers are shifting their agendas to pursue more sustainable forms of agriculture and fishing and are challenging the control of the Philippine forests and other natural resources by the few who have exploited them with little concern for tomorrow. These local groups are joined by new environmental organizations and coalitions that are putting pressure on the government for policy changes to protect the environment.

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Illustrations by Wendy Smith-Griswold: rainforest and pied hornbill, pp. 18-19; tarsier with phalaenopsis orchid, rafflesia flower, p. 20; gibbon, p. 21; clouded leopard, p. 23, pangolin, p. 25. (Illustrations omitted)

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