

Stop the massacre of the southern forests

DEFORESTATION threatens the climate and the last wild sanctuaries. A key issue of the Climate conference that opens on Monday

Aceh Province (Sumatra, Indonesia)
From our special envoy

In a yellow shirt and ochre pair of trousers, Anto is resplendent against the blue sky. And smoking, to kill time. Brush clearing, the rainy season has obliged the logger to retreat under a makeshift tent. In the shadow of giants, he is on intimate terms with his chainsaw for less than three dollars a day, having moved here since virgin forest elsewhere has already been cleared. “We have a contract to cut around one hundred hectares this month, he confesses. *I have been working as a logger for 24 years. All my life depends on this machine. It is a bit like my second skin...*”

And if there are no more forests, one day? At the heart of the jungle of Tripa, in the north-west of Sumatra, where he has taken us now, Anto raises his eyes to the canopy. Over-excited, a gibbon seems to deride “the ones from below” that cause one after another of the treetops to fall. “*Then, says Anto, beaming, if there is no forest, I will have to do something else, this is a question of survival...*”

To save his human skin. An abandoned nest overhead and leftovers of freshly eaten fruits testify to the early morning departure of orang-utans, “in critical danger of extinction” in Sumatra. Around 6.600 are living in and around the Leuser National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. And it is in the forest of Tripa, on the border of the ocean, that the most important populations, with the highest densities of this primate, are recorded.

With their engine of deforestation and the loss of the habitat of thousands of species, the palm-oil plantations win each day on the ground in Indonesia’s primary forests, the country that holds the world record in this discipline. The numbers are dizzying. Around two million hectares are cleared annually according to many experts. In half a century, the country has lost 72% of its ancient forests. And even though the rhythm has slowed (slightly), nothing seems able to stop the thirst of the paper industry, the food industry and, nowadays also the agro fuel lobby.

In Tripa four concessions totalling more than 40.000 hectares were given in the nineties under President Suharto. The chainsaws suddenly woke up again these last months... “*The forest was relatively spared in this part of Indonesia during the conflict*,” notes the Belgian Denis Ruyschaert, responsible for the programme on behalf of the Swiss PanEco Foundation that undertakes around ten varied projects concerning sustainable agriculture and orang-utan protection in Sumatra. *With the Helsinki peace agreement, that guaranteed special autonomy status for Aceh Province, Astra International, one of the leading importers of vehicles in Indonesia and a subsidiary of UK-Based Jardines, has put on a spurt to clear protected peat forests, which is clearly illegal, and at the same time taking the land of many villagers and depriving them of their means of existence, such as fishing.*” Pointing out the disregard for the different international conventions on biodiversity, climate change, and the violations of Indonesian laws and a Provincial moratorium on all forest logging, around ten national and international NGOs wrote to Astra in June. In response, closure of the only road to their concessions has deprived local communities of access to the river and the ocean.

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Wishing to witness first- hand the on-going deforestation in this part of Sumatra, *Le Soir* was turned back by police forces posted at the entrance to Astra's concession. Contacted twice from the site, Astra's Director refused to respond to our requests. It required some strategising to enter a neighbouring concession the following day, held by Kallista Alam, to assess the extent of the disaster. Less than 24 hours later, these same public forces were called in to prevent all access to the forests by the curious...

“After the tsunami, in 2004, there was total agreement from all parties that this site is of global interest and had to be maintained as a buffer zone, observes Denis Ruyschaert. Only 18 million dollars were used for environmental programmes, of the 650 million given by donor countries for post-tsunami reconstruction. And we allow the destruction of this unique forest, which will lead to an ecological and human disaster. In addition to the biodiversity loss, these forests play an important role in climate regulation and store tens of thousands of tons of carbon, now at risk of being released into the atmosphere”.



For PanEco, oil palm can produce higher yields on fallow land. Pilot projects are being undertaken, but they will not be sufficient to save what remains of the orang-utans, tigers and elephants, if poaching and deforestation are pursued at this infernal rate. Should these concessions be cancelled? This is indeed the opinion of the local people we met. Leading the protests of nine villages in the district, Sami received us at sunset at his small house in Sakamulia. This father of a family is preparing himself to send a signed petition to the Bupati (the local District Head) and the Governor of Aceh Province. *“This is not the first time we have approached these authorities, but it is time there was a change, he pleads sadly. The rights of the inhabitants are scorned. According to our estimates, Astra took over 25.000 hectares formerly used by the communities to plant bamboo and fruit trees. Astra is contesting these facts, but does not provide any title deeds! It is important to preserve wildlife for our children because this is the one thing at the root of our livelihood. I do not want a world where I can only see tigers or orang-utans on television!”* At Seumanyam, a small village of 300 people isolated at the end of another concession, uprooted fishermen seem to have lost all hope of regaining the shores of the ocean. *“We were displaced by the government during the conflict and now the plantation prevents us take back possession of our original village, explains Muhammad. We met twice with the Governor, but nothing happened and we are still without work. The plantation revoked our work contracts on the grounds that we don't have diplomas. This was simply a retaliation measure...”*

Victims of new flood inundations three days earlier, the 52 families from this small village have to squelch through deep mud. The link with deforestation is obvious. And it is reinforced by the fact that the progressive subsidence of the peat, that reaches over five meters deep in some parts, will lead to problems of salinisation,. Ironically, at the height of the paradox, this will also wipe-out the agricultural production of oil palm plantations!

Installed in Banda Aceh, the Provincial capital, Mike Griffiths, who has been fighting for three decades for conservation in the region, points his index finger at a map to explain his response: *“It is imperative to save*

these forests! The two mountain chains and their three volcanoes that make up the Leuser Ecosystem offer in fact the last chance of survival for the mega fauna of South-East Asia; he explains to us in his New-Zealand accent of 62 years. After the ecological disaster perpetrated in Borneo, we really are in the last great wild area, covering a total of 2,5 million hectares, and for this reason everything possible must be done to preserve it. And we do have enough means today to do it...

With considerable perseverance, Mike Griffiths managed to convince the Aceh authorities to grant natural sanctuary status to a 2.5 million ha area, known as the Leuser Ecosystem, that includes the national park and enact provincial legislation that provides the administrative means for its conservation. Failure is certainly not unavoidable in the face of the continuing “massacre” of Tripa. *“This is a long lasting battle, very difficult, and one for which we need the help of NGOs”*, he notes.

« It is imperative to save these forests! The Leuser Ecosystem offers in fact the last chance of survival for the mega-fauna of South-East Asia »

I have undertaken similar challenges, in other areas like nearby Singkil, where it took three years to cancel the concessions”.

The backdrop of this displayed determination is a kind of strange chess game between Banda Aceh and Jakarta. Most of the various different public actors met by *Le Soir* in Banda Aceh felt that the Provincial Government may not have enough power to cancel these concessions, since they are under the auspices of the national Indonesian capital. When approached by *Le Soir*, the Indonesian Government’s Forestry Department “did not have time” to meet us...

More accessible than the national administration, the orang-utans did not resist our attempts to share some graceful moments whilst hanging from liana in the jungles of Bukit Lawang. It is here, three hours north of Medan by road that this story began, more than thirty years ago, when the Swiss Regina Frey and the WWF developed a programme to protect and safeguard this solitary “Man of the woods”. Primatologist Ian Singleton, from the UK, took over the torch on the ground. He too is upset: *« At the current rate, the orang-utans may well be extinct by 2020. » ❖*
CHRISTOPHESCHOUNE

The PLANTATIONS, destined for the production of palm oil for food and biofuels sectors are the driving force of deforestation in Indonesia. Two million hectares are “clean-shaven” every year despite the will of this sector to produce certified sustainable palm-oil. © CHRISTOPHE SCHOONE.