

## **MEDIA RELEASE: Experts warn Tripa orangutan extinction imminent. Legal action needed NOW!**

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Today a scathing report was delivered by a panel of experts to an international press audience issuing an urgent appeal for Indonesian courts to uphold national laws following an explosion of recent fire hotspots throughout the protected Tripa peat swamps, an area hosting among the highest densities of orangutans anywhere on earth.

Dr Ian Singleton of the Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme warned the international press gallery that the population of Sumatran orangutans in the Tripa peat swamps, a UNEP/UNESCO Great Ape Survival Partnership priority site for Great Ape Conservation, is in immediate jeopardy, and unless the current wave of destruction can be halted is likely to be exterminated before the end of the year.

“The population in Tripa is considered to have been around 3,000 individuals in the early 90’s but there are probably less than 200 hanging on there today, of a global population of just 6,600, and many are already fleeing the fires, along with many other wildlife species. At this rate Tripa’s orangutan population will be locally extinct by the end of 2012”, said Dr. Singleton. “It is no longer several years away, but just a few months or even weeks before this iconic creature disappears from the Tripa swamps forever” he continued.

Ironically, any that are captured and kept illegally as pets during this process will be the ‘lucky’ ones, the survivors, but they will be refugees from a forest that no longer exists. The other’s will simply die, either directly in the fires, killed by people, or of gradual starvation and malnutrition as their food resources disappear. We are currently watching a global tragedy.

Landscape protection specialist, Graham Usher, presented his findings on the recent fires in Tripa. “Over 100 fire spots have been recorded in these peat swamps in just the last week and we have confirmed reports from the field that they are still ongoing today. A number of the fire hotspots are within the area of an allegedly illegal palm oil concession permit, of which the Head of Indonesia’s REDD+ task force; Kuntoro Mangunsubroto. told reuters, was clearly in breach of the moratorium”

The audience was shown satellite imagery of the firestorm that is sweeping across Tripa’s protected forests. Local sources have also spoken to some of the plantation workers contracted to clear the forests where most of the fires are occurring. According to them they were instructed not to do such a thorough job of clearing the vegetation as it was all going to be burned anyway, strongly suggesting a premeditated and very deliberate contravention of laws that forbid the use of fires for land clearance in peatlands.

A spatial planning expert from the University of North Sumatra, Mr Riswan Zen,

explained how he had learned from colleagues who revised the map indicating areas of forests and peatlands protected from new permits, in accordance with the president's own moratorium, that after the first version of the map, numerous companies, including Kallista Alam, had lobbied for the exclusion of their concessions from the 'off-limits' areas. They told him that staff of the National Land Agency appeared with a GIS map of the Kallista Alam concession and told the mapping team to remove it from its existing protected status, even though the concession permit was issued 3 months after the moratorium map was first issued. Riswan questioned why there was no documentation or evidence provided for the concession's sudden exclusion from protection, and recommended that any future revisions should be accompanied by explanations, with clear and transparent documentation of changes.

Despite assurances in December from the Ministry's Secretary-General of Forestry that the protected status of the area would be reinstated as a protected area, this has not been followed up, and the evidence presented by the experts clearly shows that the Tripa Peat Swamps are now on the verge of disaster.

A lawyer acting on behalf of the Coalition for the Protection of the Tripa Peat Swamps, Kamaruddin, explained how local community representatives on November 23, 2011 reported the issuing of the new PT Kallista Alam license as breaking national spatial planning laws, to the National Police in Jakarta. The head of the Police's investigation unit subsequently issued a letter stating that the case did indeed merit a criminal investigation, but then contacted the Aceh Provincial Police, asking them to follow the case up. Since that letter was sent, the Aceh Police have taken no action whatsoever. The head of the National Police was invited to the conference to respond to these statements, but no response was provided.

Walhi Aceh Executive Director, TM Zulfiker, earlier outlined an additional legal case currently being heard concerning the same concession, which will climax in the much anticipated final judges verdict in the Banda Aceh courtroom on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. TM Zulfikar described this legal action as being a very straightforward, 'black and white' case. A concession was clearly issued inside the Leuser Ecosystem, designated a National Strategic Area for Environmental Protection in the National Spatial Plan, established with Government Regulation 26 in 2008. Furthermore, forest clearance and canal construction actually began in this concession long before the permit was even granted, and it was actually granted whilst clearly shown as off limits to any new plantations under the official map of the President's moratorium on new permits in primary forests and peatlands noted above, before its mysterious removal from the revised version of the map in November 2012. President SBY was invited to the conference today to clarify his position and explain whether he is still committed to the multi billion-dollar emissions reduction agreement with Norway, and the upholding of Indonesian Law.

Teguh Surya, climate justice specialist with Walhi (Friends of the Earth Indonesia), stated that it is imperative that the judges in the above legal case reach a fair and just decision and that the Kallista Alam permit be immediately cancelled. He also expressed that the Norwegian government must have the courage to insist that an independent and transparent team is established to monitor the implementation of

the Government's letter of intent and investigate the suspicious amendments to the moratorium map that removed the Kallista Alam concession from the area 'off limits'. He also proposed that the existing moratorium on new permits should not be for a limited period only, and should include provisions for much improved governance of the palm oil industry, leading to more transparency, enhanced law enforcement and social accountability.

The general consensus was that the situation of the Tripa Peat Swamps and their orangutan population is now so critical that only immediate action will save them. The presenters stressed that there is still hope if only Indonesia would enforce its own laws, and issued a strong list of demands to this end (see following).

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