

Illegal Logging in Indonesia: Report from Aceh

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Aceh, the northern most province in the island of Sumatra, Indonesia gained notoriety the world over for the devastating tsunami of 26 December 2004. It resulted in the death of 130,000 people in the province. A lesser known fact about Aceh is that 60% of the province is still covered with beautiful diverse forests, home to elephants, Sumatran tigers, orangutans and Sumatran rhino's. Unlike the rest of the Sumatran island where forests have almost completely disappeared to years of logging activities, land conversion to oil palms and other plantations and illegal logging, Aceh has been able to retain its forests.

Aceh has been an internal conflict prone province for a long time. The GAM (free Aceh movement) separatists used the forests of Aceh a lot for their guerrilla war with the military and therefore nobody dared venture into it or cut trees. Point to ponder on - *Conflict is good for conservation*.

After the devastating tsunami, Achenese forests came under intense pressure due to the extensive reconstruction that was carried out in the following years. The calamity which ended the conflict also left thousands of combatants without an employment which led some of them into the easy business of illegal logging.

From the side of the Government there have been many measures to preserve the forests. A logging moratorium is in existence in the province since 2007. An "Aceh Green" initiative was launched by the government to spearhead sustainable economic development with protection of natural resources at the centre of decision making. A Leuser (Ache's main forest) Ecosystem Management Body (BPKEL) was established in 2006 to conserve the ecosystem and work for the welfare of the surrounding communities. In spite of all these, the forests of Aceh, today face challenges like never before.

After a four hour drive south from Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh province, I am in a village called Mane in Pidie district where the Ulu Masen forests cover the land. Ulu Masen forest is a newly given name to the forests south of the famous Leuser forests, four times the size of Ulu Masen. Ulu Masen starts north from where Leuser ends and extends upto a few kilometers short of the capital city of Banda Aceh.

Villages cover both sides of the road as we drive to Mane. Beyond the villages there are hills covered with forests. Tall trees stand densely on the hills. Often the trees on top are in conference with the clouds.

In the hills closer to human habitation bald patches can be seen where forests have been cleared. On a daily basis man is encroaching into the forests. Little by little, more and more forests are sacrificed. In some places, forests have long gone with agriculture in full swing. In other places, land has more recently been wrested from the forests.

International NGO Flora and Fauna International (FFI) runs a forest law enforcement project in Aceh province and has a base 5 km away from Mane in the forests. I spend the next two days with FFI studying their project. Gembang 15 kms away is the closest town. The dirt road all the way to the camp was in at least two feet slush. Only a powerful four wheel drive like the Misubishi that we were driving in could go up there. Sitting in the open back area of the truck with a British American Tobacco Company media team, we were thrown all about as the car skidded and bumped and jumped and again skidded along. A couple of days without rain and the clay was dry and hard in most places by the time I left.

In the camp there are about two dozen mahouts and rangers. Mahouts from from the government side and rangers trained by the FFI. All of these rangers are locals, some of them former combatants with the GAM and some of them illegal loggers in the past. The forest around the camp is dense. Mane river gurgles and foams below. In the night a generator illuminates the camp. There is a competition between the sounds of the flowing river, night sounds from the forest and the generator.

The hands of human habitation is seen all around the camp. People are spreading out deeper and wider into the forests. Fresh plantations of coffee, banana and paddy can be seen. Houses few and spread out and the jungles on hills behind them. "Conflict with animals, especially elephants is a problem for the local people," says Yaser a staff of Flora and Fauna International (FFI) accompanying me, explaining the man-animal conflict. "It is not surprising," he adds; "the forests belong to the animals too, where will they go?"

The next day the BAT team has left to see their tree nurseries that they are supporting as their contribution to post tsunami reconstruction in Aceh. I mount an unsaddled elephant, one of the 5 that FFI uses for their elephant patrols. I hang on to the mahout Abu as we head to the river for the elephants bath. Back in the camp one of the elephants is saddled. I and FFI staff Hazballah get on the back of Abu's elephant. We are accompanied by four other elephants for a patrol into the forest. The forest path soon ends and we enter into the jungle. As we go deeper there is no path anymore. Sometimes you get paths made by wild elephants and most of the time we just make a path as we go. Trees big and small, shrubs, creepers, grass, vanda and other parasites on tress, leaves on the ground, slush, slush everywhere and the shallow streams.

In the deep forests, thick foliage eats up much of the sunlight and deep undergrowth further reduces visibility. The thick carpet of leaves beneath adds to absorbing the light. And then the silence. This silence is only broken by the gurggulling streams and the energetic rivers that break up every resistance to their destined flow.

The mighty elephants break through the thicket with the mahouts cutting out the thorny rattans and other hanging branches with their machattes. The forest is thick and the progress slow. Elephants are sure footed and careful. They kneel, bend sway as they negotiate their way but they maintain their balance. At the end of three hours our progress is not much. Towards the end of our patrol we hear a chain saw in operation. But that could be a kilometer or more away. Reaching that spot on elephant back would have taken quite some time and therefore we do not attempt it.

The success of elephant patrols can only be limited. It is at the most symbolic and can help keep wild elephants away from habitation. Also, walking in the forests with all the slush can be extremely difficult without them.

The real difference is made by the reach the base has with the local community. The importance of conservation can be spread. With 10 local from the area working with you, at least they are your allies in conservation.

Back at the camp, after a hot simple lunch prepared by FFI staff, I head to the river for a bath. On the way a buffalo is huffing and puffing pulling a heavy load of freshly cut and sized wood. By the side of the river is a small stack of sized wood ready to be transported to the nearby village. Must have been a tall a big tree earlier in the day. The chainsaw we heard earlier in the day could have been responsible for this - business as usual for the locals.

Back in Banda Aceh I speak to Mr. Abu Bakar, the head of the Forestry Department for the province. According to him "with a total of 250 officers with him and 4 four wheel drive cars, our capacity to check illegal activities within forests is quite limited, given the huge area that falls in our jurisdiction." "The provincial government of Aceh," he adds "has recruited another 2000 rangers from the local population. But this force continues to be poorly trained and ill equipped to protect the forests effectively."

On the way back to Banda Aceh there were smoke rising from the hills. Some of them were really big and could be seen for many miles even from the city of Banda Aceh. These were the forests being burnt, man encroaching the forests openly. The question is while the livelihood of people is important, while land is required for agriculture, while expanding population needs to be catered to forest need to be preserved too. There is a constant call for development of remote areas. But as Mathew Linkie, Project Manager of FFI in Aceh says, "a single road can threaten hundreds of hectares of land adjoining it." Therefore a balance between between man and forests, development and environment needs to be found which is practical and sustainable. Then what about the mega economic activities in forests like conversion to oil palm plantations, mining etc, by far the bigger culprits in exterminating forests and wild life but providers of employment and revenue! A lot of questions and concern remain.

This mission to Aceh was undertaken in August 2010.