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Linking up Wildlife Conservation and Climate Change Mitigation: The Case of Orangutans in Indonesia

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Abstract

Tropical peat swamps provide numerous environmental services and contain 30 % of the world's sequestered (or terrestrial) carbon. Indonesia has 50 % of the world's tropical peat swamp. However, Indonesia peatlands are under pressure due to land use change, deforestation and fire occurrence. Indonesia is one of the top green greenhouse gas (GHG) emitters with about 2 GtCO₂ equivalents/year. Peatland and forest fires are by far the largest contributors to Indonesia's GHG emissions. In 2015, approximately 2.6 million hectares of land in Indonesia were burned, half of it on peatlands. Therefore, at the COP 21 in Paris the Indonesian government announced plans to ban new developments and forest clearing in peatlands. Moreover, the government instructed to rewet drained areas by blocking drainage canals in order to reduce CO₂ emissions.

At the same time, efforts are made by the worldwide biggest primate conservation NGO, Borneo Orangutan Survival (BOS) to contribute to the conservation of the Bornean orangutan and its habitat through the involvement of the local population. One of the intervention areas is Mawas, located within the ex-Mega Rice Project in Central Kalimantan. Mawas encompasses around 300,000 ha, most of them peatlands, and is the home to one of the last tracts of forest supporting wild orangutans. An estimated 3,000 wild orangutans and many other fauna and flora can be found in this area. A direct link to GHG mitigation is given through the role of Mawas as an important storage of giga-tonnes of sequestered carbon. Wildlife conservation activities involving forest conservation, reforestation and research thus unfold a direct positive impact on GHG mitigation. Until now, reforestation of more than 40 hectares is completed; around 27 canals have been blocked, which means that about 1500 ha has been rewetted, protecting an estimated area of 5.000 ha of community forest. Currently, new proposals, which seek to combine REDD+ project activities with Orangutan habitat protection, are in preparation, considering the protection of forest and rehabilitation of peatlands in collaboration with the central and local governments, as well as local communities.

Keywords: Borneo, climate change, Orangutan, peatlands, wildlife