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Unique Orangutan Reintroduction Project Under Imminent Threat

A Sumatran rainforest named a global priority for tigers and home to a unique orangutan rescue project is targeted for clear cutting by one of the world's largest paper suppliers.

An investigation found that since 2004, companies affiliated with Asia Pulp and Paper/Sinar Mas Group have sought out selective logging concessions with dense natural forests in the Bukit Tigapuluh landscape. The companies obtained government licenses to switch the forest status to industrial timber plantation concessions, sometimes under legally questionable circumstances. This allows for clearcutting and planting of commercial plantations, making homeless the indigenous forest-dwelling tribes and endangered species. This is in breach of the company's claims that it doesn't clear high-quality forest.

"Our investigation found that in the last six years, the company in this landscape alone contributed to loss of about 60,000 ha of forest without appropriate professional assessments or stakeholder consultation," said Susanto Kurniawan of Eyes on the Forest. "This is one of very few remaining rainforests in central Sumatra; therefore we urge the Government not to give it away to APP/SMG, who will mercilessly eliminate it and devastate local communities and biodiversity."

Bukit Tigapuluh harbors close to 320,000 hectares of natural forest, with around 30 tigers, 150 elephants and 130 rescued orangutans that were released here. "These

great apes are the survivors of the illegal pet trade who were confiscated and are finally getting a chance to live and breed again in the wild," said Julius Paolo Siregar of the Frankfurt Zoological Society. "Forest conversion plans mean certain death for many of them."

It is also home to two forest-dwelling tribes -- the Orang Rimba and Talang Mamak -- who are "being driven off their ancestral land by APP and other companies," said Diki Kurniawan from WARSI. "Many must now beg for rice handouts to survive."

Bukit Tigapuluh has been deemed one of 20 landscapes critical to the long-term survival of tigers by international scientists. In November, Indonesia pledged at a global tiger summit to make it a focal area for tiger conservation.

"The Bukit Tigapuluh landscape is a major test of Indonesia's \$1 billion climate agreement with the Kingdom of Norway," said Aditya Bayunanda of WWF-Indonesia. "We stand ready to help the Government find ways to protect the forest and Indonesia's natural heritage."

Story Source: The above story is reprinted from materials provided by World Wildlife Fund, via EurekAlert!, a service of AAAS.