

Environmentalists challenge the RSPO to rein in its members



Released on: February 05, 2013, 1:53 pm
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Industry: [Environment](#)

February 05, 2013, 1:53 pm -- [/EPR NETWORK/](#) -- A group of environmental non-profit groups including Save Wildlife Conservation Fund, Friends of Borneo, Jakarta Animal Aid Network and research scientists today filed a complaint to the RSPO over the destruction of a biodiversity hotspot in Borneo.

The group alleges that the actions of palm oil company PT Mekar Bumi Andalas (MBA) a subsidiary of Wilmar Group is in open violation of many of the RSPO's Principles & Criteria including encroachments into areas that are considered High Conservation Value Forests. MBA and other RSPO members have been building crude palm oil bulking stations in Balikpapan Bay, East Kalimantan which has open access to sea shipping. According to Stan Lhota, a research scientist that has studied the area since 2005, Balikpapan Bay is home of one of the five largest known populations of proboscis monkeys (*Nasalis larvatus*). It counts about 1400 animals, which may possibly be 5 % of the world's population of the species. Proboscis monkeys occupy mangroves, but they are vitally dependent on food resources found on dry land forest. They are therefore critically dependent on the existence of corridors, and the activities of these RSPO members are threatening the integrity of these forest corridors. The activities from building the palm oil refineries and holding stations will have a devastating and permanent impact on the area according to Stan Lhota.

Besides the destruction of terrestrial habitats, there are unique coral reefs and sea grass beds near the estuary of Sungai Berenga, that have been affected by brackish and muddy waters created by the

developments in the area. Huge amounts of soil have also been washed away from the construction site and corals are dying as they are being covered by several millimetres of thick sediments.

The area is home to Irrawaddy dolphins (*Orcaela brevirostris*) with approximately 60 - 140 animals counted. Studies have determined that the area is crucial to their feeding and daily migration between the upper and lower sections of the Bay, in accordance with tides. One of the few remaining populations of dugongs (*Dugong dugon*) is found in Balikpapan Bay as well and their prime feeding grounds are in sub-tidal sea grass beds. An early indicator of localized extinction can already be seen in the decreased sightings of Green turtles that once lived in the coral reefs and sea grass beds.

The complaint against PT MBA cites over a dozen violations of the RSPO's Principles and Criteria and is demanding that the RSPO put a stop to all activities not only from PT MBA but also from all other RSPO members in the area until all environmental concerns have been addressed. This complaint is a new challenge to the RSPO whose Principles and Criteria do not apply to bulking mills or refineries but in the words of Lars Gorschluter, Director of Save Wildlife Conservation Fund, "If RSPO standards are not mandatory to their members and forests of High Conservation Value can be torn down because it's a refinery and not a plantation, then when does the RSPO standards apply and why should we trust its certification?"

The group further demanded that the stoppage be immediate to prevent an embarrassing repeat of the Muara Tae situation where a long drawn out discussion between RSPO member, First Resources Ltd of Singapore and complainants became meaningless as the forests in question were almost completely clear cut in the two years it took the RSPO to try and decide on the case.

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