
HCVF assessments in Riau, Sumatra

The HCVF concept has been applied in Indonesia over the last five years in attempts to identify and protect high conservation value forests from conversion to pulp wood plantations. APP and APRIL, the two largest pulp producers in Indonesia, have both responded to market pressure orchestrated by WWF and Friends of the Earth affiliates by conducting and commissioning HCVF assessments in forest areas planned for conversion to Acacia plantations. While some forest areas identified as having HCVFs have not been cleared, both companies have continued clearing natural forests during HCVF assessments and even of areas identified as HCV's. Zulfahmi, coordinator of Jikalahari (1), commented, "WWF usually has problems in its attempts to get the pulp and paper companies APP and APRIL to conserve HCVF. Both companies continued to cut down forests in the Kampar Peninsular that had been identified as having high conservation values."

The Kampar Peninsular in Riau, Sumatra, contains a vast peat swamp area which is still habitat for endangered species such as the Sumatran tiger and the swamp tree Ramin. However, the prospects for these species and the whole peat swamp are poor if APP and APRIL continue to clear large areas and drain the plantation areas so that the surrounding peat forest dries out. An HCVF assessment of the Kampar Peninsular by ProForest commissioned by APRIL did not include an assessment of the conservation values relating to community use and rights (HCVF 5 and 6), although traditional communities and more recent immigrants have important ties to the area.

In other HCVF assessments in Riau, conservation values 5 and 6 relating to community rights have been included but often the information generated has been of poor quality, missing many forest values of great importance to indigenous communities. This may have resulted from lack of social experts in the assessment teams, but could also be due to how community activities are perceived. For instance, shifting cultivation, which is still practised by customary communities throughout much of Indonesia, can have a low overall impact on forests where communities maintain control of sufficient forest areas. However, shifting cultivation has been vilified by foresters for more than a century, and HCVF assessors tend to view the practice as one that destroys forest and therefore not one indicating the presence of conservation values 5 or 6. Community members that have been questioned as part of HCVF assessments often have little information about the process or how it could potentially assist their efforts to secure their access to forests and traditional livelihoods.

Another problem with HCVF assessments in Riau has been the degree to which the agenda of the pulp and paper companies - to obtain large areas for conversion to pulpwood plantations - has influenced the approach of the independent HCVF assessments that the companies commission. In one instance known to me, an independent assessor was questioned as to why his HCVF assessment of peat swamp forests scheduled for conversion to pulp plantations had failed to consider government regulations that protect areas with peat soils more than three meters deep (2). He responded that the assessment was not a legality study and that it therefore did not have to consider such regulations. When it was pointed out that his assessment should also have reviewed whether or not the forest areas concerned were degraded forests (3), i.e. areas that may be converted to pulp wood plantations, the assessor responded that if all such regulations were included in the HCVF assessment, there might not be any forest areas that the company could convert and

plant its Acacia. The assessment was not revised to include consideration of these regulations. So much for independence!

The following recommendations would go some way to addressing these shortcomings:

HCVF assessments should always include all six conservation values;

HCVF assessments should consider all relevant forestry regulations, especially those designed to conserve natural forests;

Plans for an HCVF assessment should be presented in the local language to the public at the provincial and relevant local areas;

Draft and final HCVF assessments should be available to interested parties;

Communities with ties to the areas to be assessed should be helped to understand the HCVF process before assessments take place.

The Indonesian HCVF toolkit is currently being revised (4) and hopefully the issues raised in this article will be addressed in the updated toolkit.

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Notes:

1. JIKALAHARI is a Riau NGO coalition concerned with sustainable and just forest management. Its membership includes 29 NGO's.

2. Presidential Decree (Keppres) No. 32/1990 regarding Area Management. Articles 9 and 10 state that forests located atop peat soils with a depth equal to or in excess of three meters must function as Protected Peat Areas; also Ministry of Forestry Decree No. SK.101/Menhut-II/2004.

3. Industrial pulp wood plantations may only be established on degraded forests, defined as those which contain less than 20 cubic meters per hectare for humid forests or 5 cubic meters per hectare for dry forests. Relevant regulations are Government Regulation No. 7/1999 regarding HPHTI, Article 5, paragraphs 1 and 2; Government Regulation No. 34/2002 regarding Forest Regulation and the Establishment of Forest Plans, Forest Exploitation and Use, Article 30, paragraph 3; Ministerial Decree No. 10.1/Kpts-II/2000 regarding Guidelines for Granting Permission for the Exploitation of Forest Products in Forest Plantation Areas, Article 3, paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7; Annexes to the Ministerial Decree No. 21/Kpts-II/2000 regarding Criteria and Standards for Permission to Exploit HTI in Production Forest Areas.

4. The initiative to revise the Indonesian HCVF toolkit is being funded by TNC, Tropenbos and WWF. The process over the next six months will include small working groups of experts to draft the revised toolkit and larger stakeholder meetings to provide input, raise issues and propose amendments to the toolkit.