

Erik Meijaard | March 11, 2011 The Jakarta Globe

Conservation organizations in Indonesia have a love-hate relationship with big business. Companies in the pulp and paper, palm oil, mining and timber industries have at various stages been approached by conservation groups who sought their collaboration.

But more often, these conservation groups have aggressively attacked such companies for their perceived role in deforestation and environmental degradation.

These attacks largely have proved counterproductive. What is needed is a more constructive rather than destructive engagement of the businesses involved in natural-resource management and extraction.

In the early years of conservation, say the mid-19th century, groups often came from social elites that ignored the role of local people. Locals were considered detrimental to wildlife conservation goals, and therefore had to be displaced — or at least severely restricted — through legislation when protected areas were established.

Such attitudes persisted until some 20 years ago, and are nowadays unacceptable. Conservationists have learned to accept that communities near protected sites are part of the solution.

In their view of business, though, conservationists haven't yet made the leap. Green groups still believe corporations are detrimental to their goals. The general view is that business is bad for conservation and destroys the country's forests, freshwater ecosystems and marine resources. The conclusion is often that the best thing for conservation would be if business disappeared for good: no more palm plantations, no mining and no commercial fishing.

Of course, that is not going to happen. Business is here to stay. After all, the perceived benefits from business — economic growth, employment and increased community welfare — cannot be ignored.

The present rapid economic development in Indonesia is driven by business. It leads to significant social and cultural change, and people generally welcome these developments.

Environmental organizations may change how these firms operate to some extent, but they also need to accept that business will not simply go away.

There are other reasons to promote the involvement of the business sector in saving the

environment from further destruction. Let's face it: Indonesian conservation is in a bad shape. Deforestation rates are falling slowly, but the country is still losing vast swathes of woodlands every year. Fisheries are badly managed. Most resources are exploited and will be depleted in the very near future. The number of endangered species is increasing all the time, with populations of the Sumatran rhino, Bali starling and orangutan rapidly dwindling.

Indonesian conservation is not a success story. The reason it is failing is because those responsible for implementing programs are unable or unwilling to deal with the threats to species and natural habitats. This incompetence or lack of commitment is obvious, even among some of the country's well-funded national parks.

Baluran National Park in East Java once had the biggest population of banteng, or wild cattle, in the world. Today, few remain. Kutai National Park in East Kalimantan has lost around 75 percent of its forests to illegal logging. The government has committed itself to stabilizing all wild orangutan populations by 2017, but the people in Kalimantan still kill more than a thousand orangutans each year — and no one is trying to stop them.

But the government is not the only one responsible for conservation's failure.

Most nongovernmental organizations are too small and ineffective to have a big impact on the national conservation agenda. These groups may have the commitment, but they lack the skills, financial resources and long-term presence required. They are very good at talking about conservation, but they are not very good at putting it to practice. The number of failed projects is proof of this.

A third group of stakeholders, Indonesia's urban and rural communities, is even less effective in conservation. There are exceptions, but the majority of the country's 250 million people have had a negative impact on resources and wildlife. There are a few instances when the people follow community leaders into becoming effective conservation advocates — but these are rare exceptions.

Then there is the fourth group of stakeholders — big business. Contrary to popular belief, they may actually help the environmental cause.

Conservation requires a few key ingredients. It needs secure land or sea tenure, meaning the right to manage these resources, and long-term presence in the field. It also needs sustainable funding, human resources and a strong commitment to conservation.

Corporations have the money, presence and human resources to see projects through. They just need to work on the commitment part.

The Central Statistics Agency (BPS) estimates that around 42.5 million Indonesians work in forestry, agriculture, oil palm and mining industries, of which an estimated 3.5 million are employed by large companies. In contrast, the environmental NGOs have around 1,000 to 2,000 employees.

According to the BPS, agriculture, forest, fishery and mining sectors contributed \$162 billion to the country's economy in 2009. My estimate for the total market value of all goods and direct services produced by environmental NGOs, such as employment, is around \$20 million per year.

Looking at these figures, it seems as if conservation is a David-and-Goliath battle. Or perhaps, we should consider Goliath a potential ally in solving some of the country's environmental problems.

For several decades, fighting big businesses has largely failed. It would seem a no-brainer that NGOs should try harder to use some of that enormous corporate power for the good of conservation. Even if only 1 percent of that business capacity can be used in conservation, it would vastly outweigh the civic organizations' own efforts.

The key is to find environmental champions among the many companies working in forest and marine industries. Having an eco-friendly image is worth a lot to many companies. Conservationists should actively work with these companies to launch concrete programs to preserve natural resources and wildlife instead of just spewing green rhetoric.

But nongovernmental groups also should realize that conservation is not the core business of these companies. First and foremost, corporations need to generate revenue for shareholders. Fitting conservation in that business model is the real challenge and will require compromise.

The fact is that conservationists have no choice but to work with companies. If they continue to shut out big business, the environmental movement will be unsustainable. That much is clear from more than six decades of conservation failure.

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