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Mitigating forest fires: Visitors observe a sluice gate in a river in Sebangau National Park in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, in this photo file. The sluice gate is necessary to retain water to use to fight forest fires. National parks are among the targets of the government's REDD Plus projects. JP/Wendra Ajistyatama

Local residents of Pulang Pisau village in Palangkaraya, Central Kalimantan, exhibited their hand-made products of woven bamboo and traditional medicines at the local subdistrict office.

Housewives sat on the office floor to stitch the dried bamboo, while others explained to visitors the benefits of the traditional medicines.

It was no ordinary occasion. The residents said they were told to bring their wares to show to visitors, including foreigners. They thought it was for tourism promotion.

However, the visitors came to assess the village's potential to be the pilot project for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, known as REDD Plus.

"We were told to gather at this office to show our products," Apriliani Rahayu told *The Jakarta Post* in a recent visit to the village.

She only shook her head when asked about the government's decision to name Central Kalimantan the pilot site of REDD Plus.

"Many people, including foreigners, visit Pulang Pisau. We think it is only because our village is a tourist destination," she said.

There are about 200 family members living in Pulang Pisau village. Their main income is from a rubber plantation.

Henoh Kuting, 61, of the Dayak Ngaju tribe, says the forest is their life source.

“The people usually plant the rubber to replace any trees they cut. It is part of ‘indigenous knowledge’ to protect the forest,” Henoh, who has two hectares of rubber plantation, told The Jakarta Post.

Henoh also said he had no idea why so many eminent figures had visited Palangkaraya in recent months, namely philanthropist George Soros and a number of foreign envoys to Indonesia to oversee the REDD pilot projects in the area.

Among the visitors was the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) administrator, Helen Clark, with an entourage of about a dozen, who visited Palangkaraya in April to learn about preparation for implementing REDD Plus.

In her one-day visit, Clark talked with residents about empowering locals to ensure REDD Plus’ future.

“The local community must be actively involved in [the REDD] program,” Clark said.

Clark, accompanied by the secretary of the presidential taskforce on REDD, Heru Prasetyo, also visited the REDD Plus office at the Central Kalimantan gubernatorial complex.

The government appointed Central Kalimantan as the site of the REDD pilot project last year.

Kalimantan’s economy is based on timber and agriculture, with 75 percent of the area covered by forest. A high deforestation rate, mostly from illegal palm oil firms and mining, is shrinking the forest.

The REDD pilot project is part of a US\$1 billion climate deal signed by Indonesia and Norway to trim forest loss in Indonesia.

It remains unclear what local communities, particularly those living near the forests, would get once the moratorium was implemented.

Central Kalimantan Governor Agustin Teras Narang said his office’s main activity now was to campaign for the pilot project to inform residents.

Suwido Limin, a peatland expert from Palangkaraya University, said that residents should be actively involved in planning the REDD Plus projects rather than only invited to welcome foreigners or visitors.