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Indonesian Firm Using "Deplorable" Tactics to Push Orangutan-Killer Project

A group of leading scientists is decrying the Indonesian corporation PT North Sumatera Hydro Energy (PT NSHE) for pushing a project they say could doom the critically endangered Tapanuli Orangutan.

Only 800 of the orangutans survive in a shrinking tract of rainforest in northern Sumatra, Indonesia.

"The hydro project is being widely condemned in Indonesia and internationally. In response, PT NSHE is pressuring and cajoling scientists, throwing money around to buy influence, making false statements, and now has hired a public relations firm specializing in corporate crisis management," said Professor William Laurance from James Cook University in Australia.

"These tactics are simply deplorable," said Laurance.

"The PR firm is pushing for face-to-face meetings with many scientists, while repeating false arguments from the company," said Professor Erik Meijaard of the Borneo Futures Initiative in Brunei. In 1997, Meijaard was the first scientist to discover the Tapanuli orangutan in the wild.

"The project that PT NSHE wants to build, with $1.6 billion in Chinese funding, would damage the most critical areas of the apes' tiny home," said Dr Mohammed Alamgir from the University of Chittagong in Bangladesh.

In July, 25 environmental scientists and economists, representing every major region of the world, wrote to Indonesian President Joko Widodo urging him to halt the hydro-energy project.

These researchers say the case for the hydro project, which is called Batang Toru, falls apart on close inspection ***(see below)***. Both the World Bank's International Finance Corporation and the Asian Development Bank refused to support the same project, largely on environmental grounds.

Yesterday (August 9), the largest environmental organization in Indonesia, WALHI, launched a legal case against the provincial government of North Sumatra for approving the project.

A key factor in the heavy tide of opposition is the presence of the Tapanuli orangutan, the rarest of all great ape species. "Our research has shown that where roads and other developments appear, this ape disappears," said Alamgir. "It lives only in trees and cannot survive without intact forests."

"I've been working on similar issues for forty years, and I thought I'd seen everything—corruption, threats, high-paid lobbyists. But I've never seen a company using a PR firm to challenge scientific consensus and confuse the public," said Laurance.

"It just shows that where lots of money is concerned, some corporations will go to any lengths to get what they want—even with the world's top experts all telling them it's a terrible idea," said Laurance.

"We urge Indonesians and international businesspeople to avoid dealings with PT NSHE. The Bank of China, in particular, must step away from PT NSHE or it will be just as guilty of dealing a potential death knell to one of our closest living relatives," said Laurance.

For further information contact:
Distinguished Research Professor William Laurance
Director of the Centre for Tropical Environmental and Sustainability Science
James Cook University, Cairns, Australia
E-mail: bill.laurance@jcu.edu.au (monitored continuously; Professor Laurance can conduct interviews via phone or Skype)

See Attached: Key Falsehoods from PT NSHE

The Scientists' Letter to the Indonesian President is available in English (http://www.alert-conservation.org/tapanuli-orangutan-scientist-letter-english) and Indonesian (http://alert-conservation.org/tapanuli-orangutan-scientist-letter-indonesian/).

Photographs and captions are available here: https://www.dropbox.com/home/TREE-images%20%26%20video

Key Falsehoods About the Batang Toru Hydro-Project in northern Sumatra, Indonesia from PT North Sumatera Hydro Energy (PT NSHE)

Falsehood 1: Tapanuli orangutans do not use the area that would be affected by the hydro project.

False. In fact, the area to be affected is their *prime habitat*, where they occur in their highest abundances. These habitats are rainforests on rich alluvial soils, which may well be functioning as a crucial 'population source' (an area with a high number of breeding animals), which is vital for sustaining the overall population.

Crucially, the Tapanuli orangutan has an extremely *low rate of reproduction* (with females only giving birth to a single young once every 6-8 years and then only beyond age 15), and thus is intensely vulnerable to mortality. Moreover, the species is *strictly arboreal*, living only in trees and never down coming to ground. Even a small forest clearing, such as a road without overhead canopy connections, could disrupt and isolate its population.

Falsehood 2: The apes are already fragmented into separate western and eastern populations by the existing Batang Toru River.

False. High-resolution remote-sensing imagery reveals numerous *forest connections* over the Batang Toru River, which would permit Tapanuli orangutans to cross the river. This makes it very likely that the species persists in a 'meta-population'—a series of smaller populations that are linked to one another genetically and demographically.

Overall, the orangutan's surviving population is tiny and extremely vulnerable, and would become far more precarious if fragmented into even smaller, isolated sub-populations.

Falsehood 3: The Batang Toru Hydro Project will not harm the ape or its ecosystem.

Strikingly false. The project will *cut across the heart* of the geographic range of the Tapanuli orangutan with roadways, powerlines, earthworks, dam flooding, and massive earthworks—that would be comparable to a major branch of the *London Tube excavation* in the U.K. (a 10 meter-wide pipeline that is 14 kilometers in length and only partially buried, requiring enormous excavations, tunnelling, roading, and spoil dumps in forests).

In Indonesia, an almost universal consequence of such infrastructure projects is to open a *Pandora's box* of secondary impacts caused by poaching and illegal logging, mining, farming, and forest burning. These secondary effects typically magnify the spatial scale and intensity of environmental impacts of the original project by many times over.

The project would also *destroy the major river* that runs through the heart of the ape's habitat. The river's water will be diverted to flooded dam, with only a trickle of its original flow

maintained (1-2 cubic meters of water per second, compared to its natural flows of 40-400 cubic meters per second).

This river destruction will kill the fish and aquatic life that rely on the river and sustain local fisheries, and will allow the river itself to become a *'corridor of death'*—by permitting poachers and encroachers to hike into the heart of the orangutan's habitat along the dry riverbed.

Collectively, the habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, fires, poaching, and other threats from the hydro-project and its secondary impacts could be utterly devastating to the Tapanuli orangutan—whose tiny geographic range is just 1,200 square kilometers in area, smaller than most cities (one-tenth the size of Sydney, Australia, and far less than half the size of Hong Kong).

Many other rare species, including the endangered Sumatran tiger, will also be harmed by the project and its aftermath.

Falsehood 4: The Batang Toru project is strongly justified

False. The project has among the *lowest benefit-to-cost ratios* of any planned hydro-energy project in the world. It would produce just 510 megawatts of energy for 6 hours each day, with a projected cost of over $1.6 billion.

There is no pressing need for this energy, and there are viable alternatives for energy production. For example, a proposed geothermal project nearby is slated to produce 330 megawatts of energy but could easily be upgraded to 1,000 megawatts.

The area where the project would be located is intensely active geologically and carries a high *risk of earthquakes* that could potentially cause catastrophic project failure and downstream flooding. In 2004, a tsunami produced by a nearby sea-quake killed 250,000 people in Aceh in northern Sumatra. This week (August 5), an earthquake killed 130 people and caused enormous property damage in Lombok in eastern Indonesia.

Local communities downstream of the Batang Toru project have expressed repeated concerns about the potential impact of the project on their water supply, water quality, flood risk, and fisheries.