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USAID LESTARI: STORY FROM THE FIELD

ECOTOURISM FOR ORANGUTAN CONSERVATION

By: Jelfi

It was almost dusk as we journeyed by speedboat through the Katingan River in Central Kalimantan Province. With the sun disappearing behind the silky clouds, some hornbills could be seen flapping their wide wings, flying from one tree to another. Our final destination was the Punggualas area, which is dominated by a peatland ecosystem located in Sebangau National Park. As we entered this region, we were welcomed by several inhabitants, including the blue-eared kingfisher bird (*Alcedo meninting*). Locally known as the Raja Udang Meninting, the presence of this species is an indicator that the ecosystem is in good condition.

Punggualas is home to a research center for the Bornean Orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*) that was established by WWF in cooperation with the Management Center of Sebangau National Park (BTNS) in 2008. This research center plays a crucial part in the conservation of the 6,000-9,000 wild orangutans living in Sebangau. The establishment of the National Park and subsequently this research center within it is part of the journey towards collaborative conservation. In this endeavor, the biggest challenge is seeking participation from the local people – who used to cut down trees – but are now partners in protecting the forest. WWF and BTNS apply an empowerment-based conservation approach by conducting regular outreach programs for village leaders and local people aimed at enhancing their understanding of the value of conservation.

Embracing Villagers in Conservation Initiatives

Conservation not only protects wildlife, but can also serve a social and economic purpose to enhance people's wel-

fare. This is the platform applied by WWF in developing the ecotourism potential in Sebangau National Park. The first step is to analyze the prospects for developing ecotourism in this region. Having conducted discussions with local stakeholders, the team identified several promising destinations. One of them is Punggualas.

With an informal approach, the team was able to convince the local people to get on board. In fact, some of the villagers took part in assisting WWF in implementing programs to conserve the Sebangau area. This included, (the late) Pak Kamsin, Pak Suramansyah, and the former Village Head of Karuing Village, Pak Andi Liani. These three figures actively participated in raising awareness on the importance of protecting the forest. Throughout his life, Pak Kamsin emphasized the role of the forest as central to the identity of the Dayak people. Eventually, the people embraced this concept and supported WWF and Sebangau National Park. In 2011, the Kamipang Ecotourism Cluster (Simpul Wisata Kamipang) was established - consisting of Jahanjang, Bahun Bango, and Karuing Villages - and led by Jonnedi, the Village Head of Jahanjang Village.

The three villages offer different tourism experiences. Bahun Bango Village provides cultural tourism involving the Dayak Tribe, Lake Jalan Pangen, and traditional rituals. Karuing Village, which is closest to Punggualas, offers packages to see wild orangutans. Jahanjang Village offers the unique Lake Bulat. Karuing Village has been the most popular choice as it turns out tourists are keenly interested in seeing orangutans in the wild.

The initiatives to protect orangutans have engaged the local people as partners in conservation. There are at least 50 individual orangutans that have been identified and

tagged as part of a study on orangutan behavior. For this research, around 60 local villagers in Karuing Village have been involved as assistants. In addition, 48 women from the village have been working as cooks for the research center. The research activities in Punggualas have also contributed to increased incomes for the people by allowing them to rent out their little boats (klotok) for transportation along the river. Several of the research assistants were given training to become tour guides.

The villagers now understand that sustainably managing the area enables them to enhance their livelihoods. "We are very grateful because it turns out that conserving and protecting the orangutans is positive for us. The villagers, who are mostly fishermen, can gain additional income from renting out boats, the women can become cooks for the center and for the tourists, and the young men can earn income as tour guides," said the Chief of the Karuing Village Tourism Cluster, Jeki.

The empowerment approach to conservation has proven to be effective in bringing about benefits for all parties. "The old paradigm that views the local people as a threat to the conservation area has shifted, and now people are engaged in preserving the natural environment in terms of social, economic, and cultural aspects," said Dadang Riansyah, WWF staff who has been involved in the process of initiating the ecotourism and community empowerment program in Punggualas.

Knitting Collaboration

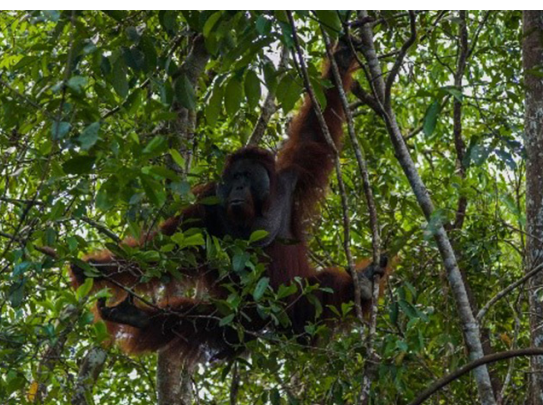
Punggualas is known not only locally but now also internationally as a popular ecotourism site for seeing wild orangutans. To maintain it sustainably, the ecotourism site requires the commitment of multi-stakeholders. This is where USAID LESTARI takes on the role to facilitate multi-stakeholders to establish a common understanding on collaborative forest management. The parties involved

are the local government (Regional Tourism Service Office and other line agencies), tourism operators, BTNS, and the local communities. LESTARI has facilitated a collaborative forum of the parties that has been endorsed by the Directorate General of Natural Resources and Ecosystem Conservation (KSDAE) of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. The signing of a memorandum will be the first ever between the local people and BTNS. It is expected to be replicated in other regions.

At the same time, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry issued a regulation (No. 43/2017) regarding the empowerment of local people residing near conservation areas. This regulation may serve as an entry point for BTNS to collaborate with the people living in the buffer zone of the conservation area. The Central Kalimantan Provincial Government also endorses and promotes the designation of Punggualas as an ecotourism destination. Through cooperation with telecommunications services provider, Telkomsel, a photo of Sebangau National Park is featured on phone cards issued since January 2018.

Pak Anggodo, the Head of the BTNS, hopes that ecotourism initiatives in Punggualas can engage the local people to be active partners in conserving the environment. "It is hoped that ecotourism based on wild orangutan conservation is sustainable. Therefore, the people would have a sense of belonging and care about conserving Sebangau National Park. The initiatives to protect the peatland forest in the national park and protect key species such as the orangutan can go hand in hand with the programs that aim to empower the local people," he said.

The concern of all the stakeholders has brought about progress for ecotourism in Punggualas. In the future, stakeholders should maintain this collaboration so that the local people continue to participate in and benefit from this initiative. The journey to Punggualas underscores an important lesson: sustaining the natural assets of this landscape is a joint responsibility.



- Photo caption (clockwise from left to right)
1. Brown, one of the orangutans identified by WWF in Punggualas
 2. Wiwin Utama, head of a women's collective in Bahun Bango Village that sells locally made products to tourists
 3. Telkomsel AS Card, Sebangau National Park Edition
 4. Punggualas Orangutan Research Center