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USAID LESTARI: STORY FROM THE FIELD

MR. JALI PROTECTOR OF LEUSER

By: Rezki Mulyadi

Forest is not merely a collection of trees, but it also interacts with humans who play a great role in preserving the forest. Protecting the two, trees and humans, is compulsory. Rajali Jamali is a dedicated person who have been trying to protect Leuser forests while making sure his efforts prosper local people at the same time. That way, people will be held back from damaging forests because it is seen threatening to their livelihoods.

Many Indonesians do not know Mount Leuser; let alone visit the mountain. Ironically, many foreigners recognise the conservation area and admit its beauty and importance to humans' well-being. The famous Leonardo DiCaprio, who once played Jack Dawson in Titanic (in 1997), paid a visit to Mount Leuser National Park on March 27 2016. The actor who won his first Oscar in the 88th Academy Awards had a chance to meet three adult orangutans and hear sounds of various rare birds including hornbill. Leo was certainly mesmerised by Leuser's exquisiteness.

Mount Leuser National Park (or abbreviated as MLNP) is a 1.094.692 hectare conservation area straddling the border of two provinces, Aceh and North Sumatra. It is approximately 3404 meter above sea level and covers different kind of landscapes from beaches until high mountains. Its tropical rainforest is unsurprisingly thick. Leuser characteristics are different from other mountains. A hike to

*“If forests are destroyed,
everything will perish ”
(Mr. Jali, tour guide of Leuser)*



Photo:
Mr. Jali, tour guide of Leuser

the top takes at least 15 days. The hiking trail is the longest in Southeast Asia and has been inscribed as World Heritage by UNESCO. No wonder why many foreign tourists are eager to visit the national park.

Rajali Jamali (or usually called Mr. Jali), a 50 year old man, seizes the opportunity by becoming a guide for hikers. He is so well-known in Ketambe that it is almost impossible for anyone not to know who he is. *"I have been a tour guide for a long time"* said Mr. Jali, as he started the conversation. Mr. Jali started to hike to the top in the '80s. Through his interaction with tourists, he can speak several foreign languages now.

Equipped with extensive experiences of climbing up to the top of Leuser, Mr. Jali is trusted by many to lead important expeditions in Leuser, especially biodiversity research expedition. In his house at Kedah, pictures of him on different expeditions are displayed on the wall, while the guestbook neatly recorded the experience and impression of various visitors that have met him.

Leuser and Mr. Jali are inseparable; Leuser is core to Mr. Jali's identity. His care for the area is no longer questioned. In addition to guiding tourists and hikers, he also protects the area from illegal loggers, encouraging local people to plant trees, and engage in regular patrol to prevent illegal poaching. He has invested countless efforts, energy, and attention to keep the area preserved. He once gave way his land in Kedah, for it to be built into the National Park Resort Office. *"I cannot protect Leuser alone. If there are other resort officers [here], that would be great. That is why I am giving away my land to be built an office,"* said Jali while laughing.

He does not only guide, but he also teaches college students and researchers who are interested in plants and animals in Leuser. His long experience in Leuser makes him recognise every detail and every corner of Leuser. He is the living encyclopaedia of Leuser.

Ups and downs

Mr. Jali experienced many ups and downs in building an established tourist center. When he first started guiding tourist, he only had a black plastic tent. Now, he has 25 lodges on the foothill of Mount Leuser in Kedah, Gayo Lues District. Since 1995, his lodge, Rainforest Lodge, has been visited by many hikers and researchers.

At first, he promoted his guiding service by using a handwritten brochure that he gave to every tourist staying in his lodge. Social media had not been invented back then. The brochure was photocopied and given to tourists from various countries: Asia, Europe, Australia, and America.

From year to year, number of tourist staying in Mr. Jali's lodge gradually increases. His income from guiding tourists also keeps increasing. Even though he can neither read nor write, he rents a post box to receive letters from tourists notifying their visits to Leuser. Every time he receives a letter, he will ask the postman to read the letter for him. Mr. Jali will then arrange the schedule and prepare the necessary logistics for the trip.

Life is full of ups and downs and so is Mr. Jali's business. When Aceh conflict occurred, an unknown person burnt down his lodge. He was extremely frustrated and desperate because of the incident knowing that

he had no money to rebuild his business. Luckily, a friend of his, a German hiker, helped Mr. Jali by giving him Rp 80 million. Thankfully, Rainforest Lodge which is located 1300 m above sea level reopened in 2007. Now, Rainforest Lodge is a favorite spot for hikers because it is where the hiking trail begins.

Seeing many people are eager to visit Leuser reassures Mr. Jali to continue his ambition to preserve Leuser ecosystem. He believes that Leuser must continue to be preserved because there are invaluable economic benefits from doing so. Tourist guiding is one of many businesses that can involve many people. "From the beginning, I am certain that tourist guiding and lodging business will grow. Now, I am thinking about expanding the hiking business and improving its quality," said Mr. Jali without doubt.

Apparently, tourist guiding is a promising job for those living in Leuser area. Now, guides do not only come from Kedah but also Ketambe. The presence of local and international tourists attract many local people to be a tourist guide. Mr. Jali does not see this as a threatening competition; he sees this positively instead. He thinks that it is necessary for him to train new guides so that they will be prepared and not disappoint tourists. There are at least 25 persons under training now. The trainees are youths who used

to be hunters in the forest. Mr. Jali certainly does not forget to internalise environmental awareness and teach entrepreneurship.

"This is how I protect the forest I love. I raise people's awareness that there are more money we can make from protecting orangutan than hunting them. There are more money we can make from trees than cutting them down. We can make money from hikers, researchers, or those who are simply visiting," said Mr. Jali.

His effort to train young tour guides is fruitful. Those who he trains have been able to guide hikers satisfyingly. Even his two children are following Mr. Jali's steps to be a tour guide. Income as a tour guide is actually fairly adequate for living in a region like Gayo Lues. A tour guide costs Rp 150,000 per day. While a porter receives Rp 100,000 per day. Usually, a hike to the top takes 15 days. Therefore, a guide can earn 1.5 to 2 million every month excluding additional tips.

In Dire Need of Assistance

Even though Mr. Jali has 25 successors, he is still worried. Unlike him, the young tour guides he trained have not been licensed. The government attention on the matter is small. "Even though they understand their roles as tour guides, they still need a formal basic training especially English proficiency so that they can be licensed and trusted by hikers. But I do not know why it is so hard to obtain it," said Mr. Jali. He thinks tour guides should be trained and accommodated by the government to attract more visitors in the future.

Ideally, a tour guide should possess a basic knowledge of Search and Rescue/SAR, environment, and management of ecotourism. His views and they way he spoke implied a big hope for the future.

While sipping a cup of coffee in his lodge, Mr. Jali talked about the importance of sustainable community-based ecotourism.

"If the facility is adequate, there are river for rafting; accessible roads; available camping ground for children; and experienced tour guides, the government will receive revenue, the overall economy will improve, and forests will be protected," he said. His hope is actually not high, but it is still a mere dream considering how small the attention the government gives to the matter. Mr. Jali never stops voicing out his concerns regardless. He can not understand why the government is uncooperative even though Leuser is supposedly the government's responsibility and the people are just helping.

Mr. Jali has featured in some international magazines and books, such as lonely planet where he is introduced as the Leuser tour guide. The world has his

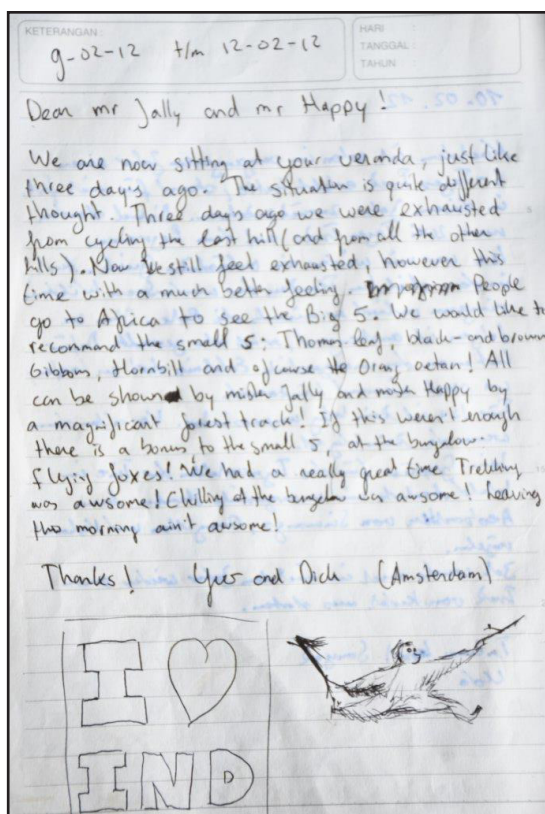


Photo:
An excerpt from Mr. Jali's guest book, containing visitors experience and impression during their visit to the Rainforest Lodge



*Photo:
Mr. Jali di Rainforest Lodge
Kedah*

back, but sadly not the government. Mr. Jali does not care, he will keep on fighting for Leuser regardless. For Mr. Jali, his allegiance to Leuser is not for the government, but for God and the local people.

"If forests are destroyed, everything will perish," ends Mr. Jali.