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USAID LESTARI: STORY FROM THE FIELD

PINING WILDLIFE NOSTALGIA

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Folklores are not meaningless bedtime story. They are knowledge which many find truthful.

Anthropocentric point of view of nature tends to put wildlife far below humans. In that case, humans will never truly care about the existence of animals.

According to folklores that have been passed down from generation to generation, the above statement does not apply to Pining people. The folklores that are still precisely remembered by the elders describes various habitats of wild animals in Pining, Gayo Lues, Aceh Province. Acehnese people, particularly those who live in Pining, are already familiar with saman dance and its song that is sung by Aman Romi. Here are the lyrics:

“Karna Gunung Laoser i negeri Gayo Ni, Tempat Tembuni Ni Datu Pudah na, Kati Musier Kuluar Negeri Munurut teliti Paru-Paru Dunia, Memang Semperne Alam Uten i Pining Ni, Tempat ni Gajah Lesten Polo Tige, Tempat Ni Kule Serdang Kala Pepara, Kedih Urum Muni Ara i Aih Putih, Celike, Arah Tengku Tue Imu Urum Kera, Cacak dih Telas Ara badak i Arul Item”.

It means, “Because Mount Leuser was the birthplace of Endatu, it is not surprising that Leuser is now known as the earth’s lung. Pining forest is indeed perfect. Elephants live in Lesten and Polo, Tigers in Serdang Kala Pepara, and Orangutans and its kinds are in Aih Putih, Celike and Tengku Tue Mount. So perfect, especially if you get to see rhinos in Arul Item.”

The song clearly shows us that sumatran elephants have been living in Lesten and Polo Tige since a long time ago. Human settlements and forests are located nearby in both regions. The song is a recognition of the valuable wildlife surrounding the local people's settlements. The regions are where elephants live free from (human) disturbances. Similarly, tigers also live peacefully in Serdang Kala Pepara.

Serdang Kala Pepara has a mystical traditional story that has been circulating in the region since a long time ago. The story says that a streak of sumatran tigers used to cross a river, called Lesten River, situated in a valley in Arul Item, Serdang Kala Pepara. The streak lined themselves up and crossed the river from noon until almost nightfall. Now, Pining Forest is considered the home of tigers.

Pining Forest is not only home to tigers but also many others, such as sumatran elephants and orangutans. In the past, Pining people recognized orangutan's territory in Air Putih, Celike, and Gunung Tengku Tue and left them undisturbed. The territory was very near to Pining people's settlement.

Traditional songs and folklores of Pining people display local wisdoms about ensuring the sustainability of wild animals and the entire Leuser ecosystem. The songs and folklores teach us about reaching a harmony between wildlife and humans.

Pining people's motivation to protect wild animals are sometimes rooted in spiritual beliefs. For example, Pining people protect rhinos because they are believed to be able to bring blessings to the people. According to them, when rhinos cross a river, it will

turn poison and dirt free. Simply put, rhinos are believed to be the antidotes to poisons.

Sadly, the harmony between animals and humans are mere nostalgia. Statistics show that the animals mentioned in the folklores are gradually decreasing in number. In the last ten years, population decline reaches 60% - 80%. There are only 100 - 150 tigers, 400 - 500 elephants and 2000 - 2200 orangutans remaining in the wild.

Folklores and Conservation Challenges

Folklore is an effective medium for internalizing and maintaining moral values in society. Folklore is an effective tool of communication especially for average reasonable people. There are benefits we can reap from them. Readers can gain valuable life lessons and experiences from these stories. Indeed, folklores tend to hold important moral lessons that many readers will find inspiring.

Folklores are not meaningless bedtime story. They are knowledge which many find truthful. Folklores are an evidence that local wisdoms can be a unique way to protect Leuser ecosystem. Pining people themselves believe that the disappearance of animals means disaster to humans.

Several research show that supernatural beliefs are actually effective to help protect nature. The research also noted that the traditional beliefs and unwritten norms and rules should be preserved. Often times, socio-cultural changes, including improvement in education, slowly erode the traditional beliefs. This is the challenge that Pining people have to overcome.



*Photo:
Protecting and preserving local fauna through local wisdom by maintaining harmony between human and nature.
(Photo: Chaideer Mahyuddin - Member of Environment Journalist Network)*

We can start by documenting all folklores related to nature preservation. The documentation is necessary to ensure that future generations will be aware of the required attempts to protect nature. Secondly, involvement of local people in preservation programs is equally important considering that they have valuable insights about the forest, their birthplace.