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USAID LESTARI: STORY FROM THE FIELD

RETURNING 33 REPTILES TO THEIR HABITAT

By: Rini Sulistyawati

So far, the cooperation between PT FI and BBKSDA Papua has resulted in the successful release of a total of 40,994 individual animals of 8 endemic Papuan species in Lorentz National Park, Wasur National Park, and Rawa Baki.

Papua contains incredibly high levels of biological diversity and is home to many endemic species. Unfortunately, their existence is under imminent threat from illegal wildlife trade. Cockatoos, pig-nosed turtles, and other exotic creatures of Papua are highly attractive to traders. Various initiatives such as forest patrols, random police searches in markets, socialization activities, and cooperation with different stakeholders have been carried out to combat wildlife-related crimes. Rescued animals will be eventually released to where they originally belong.

A serious threat to wildlife is the loss of habitat. It occurs mainly due to forest conversion into industrial agriculture plantations and mining activities. Often times, wild animals are deemed as pests to crops. Other times, they are considered a valuable commodity for trade. This combination of factors presents an enormous challenge for conservation efforts and threatens the future existence of wild animals.

In the early morning of November 24, 2014, the Research, Reclamation, and Biodiversity Department of PT Freeport Indonesia in Mile Point 21, Timika, seemed very busy. Several officers put three huge, wooden, rectangular boxes and two plastic ones in

front of the office. They contained twenty white-lipped pythons (*Leiopython albertisi*), eight green tree pythons (*Morelia viridis*), one scrub python (*Morelia amethystina*), one blue-tongued skink (*Tiliqua gigas*), one New Guinea ground boa (*Candoia aspera*), and two New Guinea crocodiles (*Crocodylus novaeguineae*).

At the time, the thirty-three Papuan endemic reptiles had been treated in a temporary quarantine in Mile Point 21 for a week. Thirty-one snakes were saved by Reptile Timika Communities (RTC), and the crocodiles were saved by employees of PT Freeport Indonesia.

“Three out of thirty-four animals brought by Reptile Timika Communities to the quarantine are dead because they refused to eat. The rest, thirty-one snakes, will be released back to Minajerwi peat forest along with the crocodiles,” said the Head of KSDA SKW II Timika, Bambang H. Lakuy.

In an attempt to protect wild animals in Papua, various stakeholders, including BKSDA and USAID LESTARI, are working together to save and return trafficked animals back to the wild. Their habitats are also protected, preserved, and restored. Education and socialization regarding wildlife protection and illegal wildlife trade are also conducted to support the cause.

The effort is nowhere easy. Returning healthy animals to the wild takes a long time and a huge effort. A quarantine facility has to be built first to allow injured animals to recover and ensure their survival in the wild. The entire attempt of saving Papuan animals

requires meticulous observation and evaluation to ensure its effectiveness and efficiency.

For the last 10 years, Papuan Natural Resources Conservation Center (BBKSDA) has been treating confiscated animals in the center of Research, Reclamation, and Biodiversity in Mile Point 21. The facilities there include one birdcage, seven ponds for pig-nosed turtles, incubators, butterfly captivity center, and laboratories.

There are at least three prerequisites before releasing animals to the wild. First, the animals must be released to their original habitat. Second, the animals' good health must be ensured. Lastly, the presence of other animals living in the habitat where they will be released must be taken into account.

In the quarantine facility, the confiscated animals are first treated for physical injuries or stress. Many animals suffer from stress due to improper capture methods.

“Health checks help to heal trauma and ensure that the animals are free from diseases to prevent contagion when they are released to the wild,” said Ardiansyah, a veterinarian.

Moreover, animals who have been kept as pets must also be helped to transition to living in the wild.

Heading to the Release Spot

The release was attended by thirty-one participants from KSDA SKW II Timika, PT Freeport Indonesia, Timika Agricultural Quarantine, RTC, and LESTARI.



Photo: Hand over ceremony between the manager of Enviro, the Research, Reclamation, and Biodiversity Department of PT Freeport Indonesia and Gesang Setyadi, Head of KSDA Timika, Bambang H. Lakuy.



Photo:
Preparing transportation for animals that will be released at the MP 21 to the Port of Port Site.

In his opening remarks, Gesang Setyadi, Enviro Manager of PT FI, explained that the company is committed to preserving Papua's wonderful biodiversity. *"Today's event displays the serious commitment of PT FI in protecting wildlife,"* he said.

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Support from various stakeholders in preserving Papuan plants and animals is desperately needed, taking into account the fact that many of them are often considered as pests. BKSDA feels the support is valuable to fill in gaps in conservation efforts. Timika Agricultural Quarantine, RTC, and LESTARI all work together to monitor the health and the recovery of the animals in the facility.

"I hope the cooperation will not end here. I hope there will be innovation in the future that can speed up the process of recovery and release," said Bambang.

Minajerwi, Eastern Mimika, a peat forest located far away from human settlements, is usually a place for releasing animals. The area is the natural habitat of endemic reptiles of Papua. The Head of Papuan BKSDA stated, *"this location is chosen after a rigorous survey conducted by BKSDA and Team Enviro in many sites. This location turned out to be the natural habitat of reptiles, especially crocodiles."*

The location can be reached within two hours with a speedboat. The release spot was chosen nearby a river. The snakes were released one at a time to the trees, ground, or river. A total of thirty-one Papuan snakes were released to their natural habitat. The

two crocodiles were released afterwards.

Commitment of Stakeholders and Animal Activism Groups

The release of the animals is one of many agreements produced by the Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF) in Mimika. In a document that was signed on May 12, 2016, the MSF commits to protect wild animals taking into account the imminent threat of wildlife trade in the region.

In addition to MSF, Reptile Timika Communities (RTC) is one of many organizations that are dedicated towards animal protection, especially Papuan reptiles. The organization was founded in February 2016 and now has thirty active members. The organization focuses on reptile breeding and socialization of the importance of animal protection.

"We are concerned with the fact that many reptiles are being killed by humans," said the Head of RTC, Jarod Wahyudi.

On Animal and Plant Day, November 17, 2016, RTC gave thirty-four snakes to KSDA Timika. The snakes came from either their breeding program or hand-overs from the people.

As part of an ecosystem, humans are inevitably connected to the environment that consists of thriving plant and animal life. Protecting animals is essentially an attempt to protect human lives. The attempt to return wild animals back to their natural habitats is one of many actions needed for animal protection and environmental conservation.



Photo:
Releasing twenty white-lipped
pythons (*Leiopython albertsi*),
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(*Morelia viridis*), one scrub
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