



10 July 2018

President Joko Widodo
Presidential Palace
Jakarta, Indonesia

Dear Mr President:

We are writing to you as some of the world's leading scientists with a special concern about one of Indonesia's most critically endangered and high-profile wildlife species.

As you well know, Indonesia is a nation of almost boundless environmental and biological wonders. Among the most crucial of all locales in Indonesia is northern Sumatra—the last place on Earth where orangutans, tigers, elephants and rhinoceros still survive together.

The Tapanuli Orangutan

Northern Sumatra is also home to an entirely new species of orangutan that was scientifically described just last year—the Tapanuli orangutan. This species differs from the Sumatran and Bornean orangutans in terms of having a very distinctive genetic composition, and a different body and head shape, behavior, vocalizations, and fur texture. It is, in short, a unique—and uniquely Indonesian—species of great ape.

The Tapanuli orangutan is only the seventh species of great ape known on Earth and is clearly among the most imperilled, with fewer than 800 animals surviving in a tiny tract of forest less than one-fifth the size of the greater Jakarta region (Jabodetabek).

Being one of the most critically endangered of all great apes, there is enormous national and international interest in conserving the unique Tapanuli orangutan. Its tiny population is already broken into three separate forest fragments, and it is vital that these isolated forests be protected from further degradation and also relinked to one another via forest-restoration efforts.

Batang Toru Project

Just as crucially, the Chinese-funded Batang Toru hydropower project could be the death knell for the Tapanuli orangutan, by flooding a key expanse of its habitat and, even more crucially, by slicing up its remaining forest home with new roads, powerlines, tunnels, and other built facilities. Roads are a particularly insidious threat because they open the ape's habitat to poachers, illegal loggers, miners, and land encroachers. A recent scientific analysis shows that the Tapanuli orangutan survives only where roads are almost entirely absent.

The Batang Toru project will create a massive disturbance in the heart of the Tapanuli orangutan's only remaining refuge, including:

- A large (10-meter-diameter) tunnel that would cut through 13 kilometers of rugged primary forest, where there will be more than one million cubic meters of soil and rock debris
- An inspection road for the tunnel along this primary forest
- High-voltage power lines cutting through the primary forest
- Construction of a hydro-reservoir on North Sumatra's earthquake epicenter, very close to a major tectonic fault-line

Key Actions

Therefore, with all due deference and respect, we urge you to:

1. Halt further developments in the last remaining habitat of the critically endangered Tapanuli orangutan
2. Recommit all remaining habitat for the orangutan to a status that provides effective protection and management, including clear demarcation of the forest, patrolling, and anti-poaching efforts.
3. Take urgent steps to reconnect the remaining habitat blocks via forest corridors (an entirely feasible action given that the fragments are separated only by small distances).
4. List the Tapanuli orangutan as a high-profile protected species on the Indonesian protected species list.

Mr President, we know well of your strong background in forestry and business and your leading efforts to reduce the spectre of destructive fires in Sumatra. We appeal now to you to help conserve one of the most unique and high-profile wildlife species in all of Indonesia. The Tapanuli orangutan is rightly taking its place alongside the mountain gorilla, chimpanzee, and Sumatran and Bornean orangutans as some of the most iconic wildlife species on Earth.

An action of this nature would bring you the enduring gratitude of many Indonesians and overseas citizens eager to see global conservation leaders emerging in our increasingly self-interested world, at a time when leaders of many other nations seem to have lost sight of the importance of a healthy environment for our citizens and children.

We thank you for your kind consideration of our perspective and appeal.

Sincerely,

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