



Response to North Sumatra Hydro Energy's Claims on Orangutans: Prof. William F. Laurance

The development of a \$1.6 billion hydroelectric project in North Sumatra could potentially threaten the survival of the world's rarest great ape, the Tapanuli orangutan, a global activist group says. (Photo courtesy of WWF/Maxime Aliaga)

By : William F. Laurance | on 9:14 PM October 02, 2018
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Response to claims by North Sumatra Hydro Energy (NSHE) in the Jakarta Globe's article titled "[Will \\$1.6b Hydroelectric Plant in South Tapanuli Endanger World's Rarest Great Ape?](#)"

1. The company said in the article that it would alter only 90 hectares of the Tapanuli orangutan's habitat.

This and many of the other of NSHE's arguments are outlandish and easily countered. The best analogy I can use is this: using NSHE's logic, someone could cut off your head and there would only be minor damage, because far less than 1 percent of your tissue would be destroyed.

The hydro-project will cut across the heart of the geographic range of the Tapanuli orangutan with roadways, powerlines, earthworks, dam flooding and massive earthworks. That would be comparable to the excavation of a major branch of the London Tube in Britain (a 9.7-meter-wide tunnel that is 12.4 kilometers long, with at least six lateral access tunnels along its length, requiring enormous excavations and tunneling, using several thousand tons of dynamite and requiring large-scale roading and spoil dumps in forests).

But this massive impact is only the beginning. In Indonesia, an almost universal consequence of such infrastructure projects is to open a Pandora's box of secondary impacts – caused by poaching and illegal logging, mining, farming and forest burning.

These secondary effects hugely magnify the size and intensity of the environmental impact of the original project many times over. For example, in the Amazon basin, the secondary impact of mining – which result from building roads to the mining site and thereby allowing illegal deforestation – is 12 times greater than the impact of the mining project itself.

The Batang Toru project would also destroy the major river that runs through the heart of the ape's habitat. The river water will be diverted to a dam, with only a trickle of its original flow maintained. This will kill the fish and aquatic life that rely on the river and sustain local fisheries. It would also allow the river to become a "corridor of death" by allowing poachers and encroachers to hike into the heart of the orangutan's habitat along the dry riverbed.

Collectively, the forest loss and fragmentation, fires, poaching and other threats from the hydro-project and its massive secondary impacts could be utterly devastating to the Tapanuli orangutan, whose tiny geographic range is just 1,200 square kilometers – smaller than most cities.

Many other rare species, including the endangered Sumatran tiger, will also be harmed by the project and its aftermath.

2. The company says it will use technology that is environmentally friendly, and also allocate 30 hectares for orangutan conservation.

There is nothing environmentally friendly about the networks of roads, high-tension powerlines, earthworks, tunneling and river destruction involved in the Batang Toru project, nor the devastating impacts those projects would bring by opening the heart of the orangutan's population to human pressures.

What is so unsettling is that NSHE is presently seriously false and misleading information and using illicit means to suppress arguments against the Batang Toru hydro-project. We have had confirmation of high-pressure efforts being used to stop or delay stories from being published, from several sources including informants at two leading news outlets in Southeast Asia. These activities are presently being examined by top scientific journals and investigative reporters. The seriousness of this claim cannot be overstated, as it moves one directly into the realm of criminal activities.

As a final example of NSHE's nefariousness, it cites the Aek Nauli Environment and Forestry Research Agency (Anefra) in claiming the project area – which largely overlays rich alluvial soils – is not the orangutan's primary habitat. But this consulting firm is notorious for producing unreliable research to aid industry. Field research by my colleagues in Sumatra has shown their findings to be woefully inaccurate. These false findings are being widely cited by NSHE, which paid Anefra for their work.

3. NSHE says it also cooperates with scientists. And that Indonesian scientists know more about orangutans and that it also provides scholarships to those wanting to undertake doctoral programs on the apes.

NSHE is certainly throwing money around to enlist and influence scientists, but it is being very clumsy about it. The leading signatories of our scientists' letter to President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo are among Indonesia's top experts on orangutans, primates and forestry.

Nearly all the money NSHE is spending so lavishly is coming from Chinese financiers and corporations that are the leading funders of the project. Could one really believe these foreign interests care about the orangutan? Or are they trying to make profits and gain political influence in Indonesia?

The Indonesian and international scientists that have spoken out about the Tapanuli orangutan have no financial stake in advocating for its survival. We do so because we are truly alarmed about the world's rarest great ape – one of our closest living relatives – and because we believe the hydro-project will have serious social, financial, and political risks for local communities.

The hydro-company wants to ram the project through over growing public concerns – stall, confuse, and suppress debate while the bulldozers growl ahead.

We want there to be enough time for the Indonesian public to learn about and openly debate the ape-killer project, so they can see all its risks and problems. This is where leadership by President Jokowi could be instrumental, to call for a transparent debate on the issues.

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The professor has sent a letter to President Joko Widodo to express his concerns over elements of the debate on the fate of the Tapanuli orangutan in North Sumatra, which he believes will be threatened by the presence of a hydroelectric power plant. A copy of the letter is available [here](#).



Tapanuli orangutans