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From The Field: RAN's Work Pays Off In Indonesia

Written by Laurel Sutherlin

Topics: Frontline Communities, Profiles

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I've only been in Indonesia for a few days and already I've heard multiple accounts of intimidation, corruption, kidnapping, torture and even murder suffered by our allies here who have been bold enough to speak out and resist the destruction of their forests and villages by palm oil and pulp and paper companies. But I am going to save those dark tales for another post and start this one with a happier story.



Dr. Bayu Wirayudha, founder and CEO of Friends of National Parks Foundation

I didn't expect to encounter evidence of RAN's work in Indonesia until after I finished a three-day personal trip to the island paradise of Bali. After that, my plans were to immerse myself in two weeks of conservation-related meetings and site visits on the islands of Java and Sumatra — that's what I traveled across the world for. But a close friend of mine who knows of my strong passion for birds told me that while I was in Bali I had to make a point of seeking out Dr. Bayu Wirayudha, the man widely credited with rescuing the iconic and critically endangered Bali Starling from the very brink of extinction (a truly incredible and ongoing story of its own).

It turns out Bayu is also the founder and CEO of Friends of the National Parks Foundation (FNPF), an inspiring organization that I learned has received funds from RAN on more than one occasion. I spoke at length with Bayu at his office/educational center/activist-organizing hub on the outskirts of the village of Ubud, Bali, and learned why FNPF is exactly the sort of frontline ally RAN is proud to support.

It's important to understand that the threats facing the rainforests and communities of Indonesia are extreme and the challenges encountered by those trying to stem the destruction are immense and extraordinarily complex. Corruption is pervasive throughout the government and corporate spheres, and challenging those entrenched interests often means put your life on the line. The power wielded

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by the forces of profit and politics are almost beyond comprehension when viewed from the perspective of a villager fighting for their home or a conservationist struggling to save a species from extinction. So it takes some serious savvy to make headway against the seemingly unstoppable tide of forest conversion and community displacement sweeping rapidly across the country.



FNPF staff educate villagers about the importance of conservation

Bayu and his team understand that human rights, cultural survival and biodiversity preservation are inextricably linked in Indonesia. Conservationists here have learned the hard way that without the endorsement and involvement of local communities, desperate and disenfranchised villagers inevitably return to a slash and burn, extraction-based existence, dooming even the best-funded and well-intentioned conservation initiatives to failure. The approach of FNPF is a sophisticated melding of wildlife conservation, habitat protection and community development. Bayu praised RAN for supporting his organization's vision at a time when other donors were unwilling to invest in such far-sighted plans.

With RAN's help, FNPF has spent years gaining the trust of communities surrounding the huge and species-rich but conflict-ridden Tanjung Puting National Park on the island of Borneo. More than half of the forested land within the park has already been degraded by logging and agricultural encroachment. They built this trust partially by providing the villages with their first-ever cows and chickens, and the know-how to tend them for sustenance. At the same time, FNPF staff helped the villagers establish agroforestry operations with crops like rubber trees and agar wood that provide sustainable income while maintaining high levels of biological diversity. FNPF is also training local villagers to offer outstanding ecotourism opportunities in and around the National Park, giving locals a way to benefit from this lucrative emerging industry (before, ecotourism profits went exclusively to outsiders).



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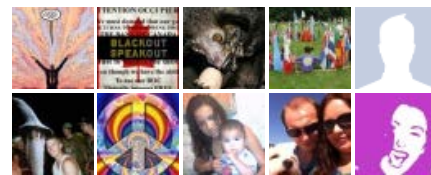
Last week two University of Missouri students served a Citi Bank recruitment event with a clear message: we DO NOT support their funding of the coal industry!

Students all across the country are calling out fossil fuel funding banks. Everyone needs to join them:

<http://dirtymoney.org/>

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Villagers learn how to propagate key tree species

Bayu relayed a heartening story about how local palm oil workers now call his staff at FNPF when an orangutan enters the palm plantations, so the animal can be relocated unharmed, whereas previously they would have killed them on sight or called the notorious Forestry Ministry, which would have done the same.

These hard-fought, piecemeal advances may be just a drop in the ocean compared to the immensity of devastation underway across Indonesia's rainforests, but they provide preciously rare living proof that a cooperative way forward is possible from the heinous mess that exists now. People like Bayu, and projects like those of FNPF, are like saplings rising up from a clear cut forest. With enough light and nourishment, it is these fresh starts that can take root and provide shade for others to do the same.

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About the Author



Laurel Sutherlin is RAN's Communications Manager for the Forest Program. He is a life long forest defender and social justice advocate specializing in environmental education and strategic communications. Before coming to RAN, Laurel worked closely with diverse groups including the Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center (KS Wild), the Oxygen Collective, Students for a Free Tibet and The Yes Men. He is also a trained naturalist with a passion for anything with feathers, fur, leaves or scales

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Kiri says:

@TheRightPaper

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July 8, 2011 at 8:07 am

Great post Laurel!!! Philly, Momo and I are here in Boulder living vicariously through your travels and work. Did you know that I lived in Ubud as a teenager?? I can picture you there with all those birds!!! Keep writing, we'll be here reading. <3



Hillary says:

July 8, 2011 at 12:28 pm

What an inspiring story of connection and cooperation. We can all be part of the solution by supporting the communities on the frontlines of these important struggles. Thank you for sharing this positive story!



Rob Moerbeek says:

August 30, 2011 at 11:51 am

Respect the rain woods. Respect the rights of the indigenous peoples, who live there ecologically. Others have no right to touch the woods.
Exploiters are criminals.

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