

USAID LESTARI: STORIES FROM THE FIELD

FOLLOWING THE LEUSER TRAIL WITH IBRAHIM FROM KETAMBE

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Many people want to keep Leuser as one of the most important conservation areas of Indonesia and in fact even the whole world has eyes on this region. However, it is rare to find people who really dedicate their lives to guard the last fort of the Sumatran forest. Nevertheless for more than 20 years, Ibrahim from Ketambe, South East Aceh has devoted his life to protect the endangered species living in the Leuser area.

The Leuser region is one of the most important conservation areas on the face of the earth which is located in Aceh and North Sumatera. Covering an area of 2.6 million hectares, this region is known for its rich biodiversity. The dramatic topography supports the function of the Leuser ecosystem that is utmost valuable for the livelihood of 4 million people living around that area. This area is also the largest protected area of the Malesian rain forest that is still untouched. Having such a diverse collection of wildlife, the Leuser rain forest is famous as a source for science studies to research on species of mammals, birds, reptile, fish, and other invertebrate species, plants and other organisms. The Leuser region also serves as the habitat for various rare species of plants.

Being aware of such extraordinary value of the Leuser ecosystem, Ibrahim, a native Acehnese, has dedicated himself to protect this region. With more than twenty years of experience, Ibrahim can not only tell what plant it is by sniffing the leaves, the sap of a tree, a fruit or tree bark, but he also knows what the plant is used for. These skills were developed from autodidact learning and due to his involvement in several researches on biodiversity since 1986. Although he never went to college nor did he understand any scientific research methodology, apparently Ibrahim is considered as a pro-

fessional researcher. The story of Ibrahim as an expert on rare species in Leuser began when he was the field assistant for a research project in Leuser under the Siamang Gibon Project in 1986. In his early age of 22 years at that time, Ibrahim started a career in studying mammals at Ketambe, in South East Aceh together with Ryne Palombit, an anthropologist and primate behavior researcher from Rutgers University (US).

This is why Ibrahim- or “Bang Him” as his colleagues call him - is known as a specialist in the flora and fauna research in Aceh. His work involves research as an individual and as a team from various national and international research institutes. At his home in Ketambe, Bang Him just returned from his assignment to install a camera trap in East Kalimantan to research the orangutans in collaboration with WWF, *“I just arrived home a few days ago, but I am coming back after the Idul Fitri holidays, to check the footage from the camera trap and analyze the condition of the orangutans in East Kalimantan,”* said Ibrahim.

His expertise in identifying mammals and rare plants in the forest rendered him the title of a “Professor without a Degree”. Several prominent scientists that have studied the flora and fauna of the Leuser forest and have benefited from Ibrahim’s expertise, includes Carel Van Schaik (Netherlands), Elizabeth Fox (US) dan Ian Singleton (UK).



Photo: Ibrahim “Professor without a Degree” or also known as “Bang Him,” specializes in flora and fauna research in Aceh.

In addition to having such in-depth knowledge on the flora of the forest, Ibrahim is also skillful in identifying the behavior of animals just by observing the animals’ trail, and by analyzing the stool of the animal, he can identify the plants that have been consumed by the animal. However, there is one big question for him, after 20 years of research, Ibrahim has never seen a live rhino in the Leuser forest. He only saw the rhino from the footage of the camera trap that was installed by his team of researchers. The dense forest, the vast area to cover, and the sharp senses of the rhino in using their smelling senses to avoid humans (*the rhino can sense the presence of humans from a great distance*) are some of the reasons for not being able to spot any live rhino. Sometimes Ibrahim together with his team would often stay in the forest for at least 2-3 weeks, hoping to get a glimpse of any rhino.

“Up to now, I have never seen a live rhino. Not only because the area of the forest is so large but also because there are only a few rhinos left in the Leuser forest, probably only around 30 rhinos are living in Leuser,” he said.

Ibrahim’s expertise is certainly outstanding and is acknowledged by many. There are at least 500 plants and trees that have been identified in the Leuser region. Having a strong passion to understand the phenomena of the Leuser forest, Ibrahim always show an analytical stance in his daily activities, since he consistently observes the growth process of plants or trees in the Leuser forest by making a demo plot of the forest. The method of identification is quite unique. In naming the plants, he uses the local language and then added a scientific name. *“So we will still keep the local characteristic of the plant”*, said Ibrahim.

Having such broad experience, Ibrahim understands all types of field research, particularly research on biodiversity. Upon completing his assignment as the field assistant in the Siamang Gibon Project, he joined several other researches from different institutions. He also participated in a training program on research methodology held by the Indonesian Institute of Science (LIPI). As a professional researcher, he was able to explore other forests throughout Indonesia. Many scholars - starting from those pursuing their bachelor degrees up to doctoral degrees in studying the Leuser biodiversity - have benefited from Bang Him’s know-how, including researchers from the Netherlands, Canada, Germany and the US. However, Ibrahim regrets that he has never received the reports from the research done by these foreign researchers. Nevertheless, he doesn’t mind and said, *“It isn’t important that I get the results of the*

Photo:
Bang Him, explaining about the current condition of Aceh's forest.



research. What is more important is that the research results will be useful for the public at large”.

Leuser Has Changed

“Leuser is not like it used to be,” said Ibrahim. Now, the climate is unpredictable and the climate has changed because of the land clearing and illegal logging. The ecosystem has become unbalanced. In the past, the wild life of the forest were easily found, but nowadays they have become scarce or even have disappeared, worsen by the wild life poaching. Showing a sad face, Ibrahim said “We used to hear the horn bill bird from our own back yard, but now it's hard to find any. There are probably at least 5 tigers that are taken out from the Leuser forest every month from poaching.” His love for the Leuser forest is supported by his family especially his wife and children. However, not all of his children are following their fathers' footsteps in caring for the environment. Only his second child out of his six children is pursuing the same track with his father and in fact he has served many trekkers as a guide in exploring the Leuser forest through the Ketambe trail. Ibrahim is concerned that there is lack of awareness and attention from the younger generation towards the conservation of the environment. “The younger generation nowadays are really appalling, we don't have any young people that care about the Leuser forest,” said Ibrahim thinking about the future of Leuser. Most young people now prefer to work for companies rather than work as a researcher. They also don't see the opportunities for a promising development of ecotourism in the future. This lack of interest is a threat for the sustainability of Leuser Forest.

Ibrahim admits that the lack of concern and participation from the community is due to the limited access and opportunities. Ibrahim says that if the people were given better access to co-manage the forest for ecotourism, the local community would participate in safeguarding the forest. With improved welfare, the people would become more aware of the importance of taking part in conserving the forest. “In the past, it was difficult to obtain a permit to enter the conservation area—SIMAKSI”. To rely only on the government to protect the enormous area of the Leuser forest is certainly unrealistic. Therefore, community participation to co-manage the forest should be considered carefully with the aim to also enhance the livelihood of the people. The opportunity for opening ecotourism in Leuser is an entry point to collaboratively improve the welfare of the local community, particularly the people in South East Aceh.

“Isn't it true, if the people are prosperous from the forest, they would safeguard the forest. Of course, people would not ruin its own source of livelihood”, he said optimistically.

New Generation Leuser Researchers

Most of the research activities were sponsored by foreign institutions, such as NGOs or international research centers that have conducted studies in the Leuser conservation region. That is why Ibrahim hopes that the Indonesian government would give more attention to develop the capacity of the local community to do research particularly in collaboration with Indonesian universities. Without serious effort in supporting local resources for research

in the Leuser conservation area, there is a concern that the knowledge from the research results on the flora and fauna of the Leuser forest would be “drained out” to foreign entities.

Ibrahim himself has initiated capacity building programs for university students in doing research on biodiversity. However, unfortunately, the reading references, education tools and information sources are very limited. Appreciation to those who have contributed their time and effort in identifying and safe guarding the Leuser Forest is also insignificant. *“Even up to now, I have never had a discussion with the local government, but if we are needed, we would certainly be ready to enter into a dialogue,”* he said jokingly.

Ibrahim shall continue with his passion to conserve the Leuser Forest and he shall be available if his expertise is still needed. Hundreds of names of the flora dan fauna that are pread out in the Leuser Forest have been recorded meticulously. Ibrahim hopes that one day, he will be able to publish these records as a book so that more people can use it as a useful reference particularly for the younger generation and that more people shall be able to appreciate the flora and fauna in the Leuser region, but the lack of funding is one of the constraints to publish such book.

This book is expected to become a monument of his dedication towards the Leuser Conservation Area and as a heritage for the sustainability of the much-loved Leuser Forest. His extraordinary expertise is really appreciated and he is admired as a role model for environmental conservation. Ibrahim and the great forest is always united.