

<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/12/indonesias-five-most-consequential-environmental-stories-of-2020/>

Mongabay Series: [Asian Rhinos](#), [Indonesian coal](#), [Indonesian Fisheries](#), [Indonesian Palm Oil](#)

Indonesia's five most consequential environmental stories of 2020

by **Loren Bell** on 29 December 2020

- *2020 has been a momentous year for Indonesia's environment, and for the regulations and regulators put in place to protect it.*
- *Perhaps most far-reaching is the passage of a massive deregulation bill critics warn will cater to the business community at the expense of the environment and social interests.*
- *The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a significant impact on conservation efforts in the country, putting the brakes on key conservation programs and potentially driving an increase in deforestation and poaching.*
- *Here, Mongabay reviews five of the key stories and trends from Indonesia in 2020.*

In Indonesia, the year 2020 has been marked by a number of events and decisions with significant, and likely long-lasting, environmental impacts. Here, we review five of the key stories and trends from Indonesia this year, ranging from the passage of sweeping new legislation to the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has both helped and hindered conservation efforts.



Rainforest cleared for an oil palm plantation in Indonesia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler

Omnibus bill ushers in deregulation

The far-ranging and long-lasting impacts of this year's biggest story have yet to be felt. After the government hastily compiled a massive [deregulation bill](#) largely in secret with [limited public input](#), the Indonesian parliament pushed the omnibus bill through this October. The bill is wide-ranging, poorly understood, and contains [sometimes conflicting provisions](#) that critics warn will cater to the business community at the [expense of the environment](#) and social interests.

Advertised as a jobs creation and investment bill, and pushed through as part of a rapid COVID-19 response, the revised laws contain so many changes that it is impossible to predict the potential fallout. Among the more troubling are several provisions long sought after by the [mining industry](#), changes paving the way for industrial agriculture and [speculative land banking](#) at the expense of local farmers and forests, and revisions that potentially cripple [fisheries protections](#).

Of greatest concern, however, are the bill's recentralization of the permitting process for plantations and mines, coupled with severe limitations on [public participation](#) in the environmental assessment process. Under the new laws, only those who are directly impacted by a project can raise objections — a restriction that will hinder the ability of NGOs and conservation groups to challenge developments on behalf of

small farmers and Indigenous communities. In some instances, the law scraps the need for environmental permits altogether, relying instead on developers' self-declarations of compliance.



A rhino calf, photographed in 2016 at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Plans to build another sanctuary in Aceh have been put on hold due to COVID-19. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

COVID-19 impedes conservation

Amid the lockdowns and restrictions to reduce the spread of COVID-19, some areas in Indonesia have seen increased [activity by poachers](#) as local communities suffer economic hardship and look for new ways to feed themselves. [Shutdowns of national parks](#) were initially seen as a potential chance to reduce pressure on the country's remaining protected areas. However, the sudden drop in tourism income has added new pressures on the limited resources. The uptick in illegal hunting has largely focused on food species, rather than the exotics typical of the illegal pet or animal parts trade, and restrictions have made it more difficult for enforcement teams to respond to poaching reports. A [spike in deforestation](#) amid the pandemic is also attributed in part to travel restrictions hindering investigations and response.

COVID-19 disruptions have also delayed the completion of a critical [captive-breeding facility](#) for Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) near Aceh's Leuser Ecosystem, where the population has dwindled to around 12 individuals. The rhinos

are on the verge of extinction, and the facility, initially slated for completion in May 2021, will join two other captive-breeding sanctuaries in a last-ditch effort to save a species that once roamed widely from the Himalayas to the Malay Peninsula. Plans to capture a male rhino to join the lone female in captivity in Indonesian Borneo have also been [put on hold](#) due to the pandemic.



Described by science in November 2017, the Tapanuli orangutan is already listed as critically endangered by the IUCN. A hydropower project planned for its only habitat has been delayed by COVID-19. Image by Andrew Walmsley.

COVID-19 delays destruction

While the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have been devastating, conservationists have been handed a few small wins through delays in major infrastructure projects that threaten to permanently alter the Indonesian landscape.

Most significantly, the highly ambitious and controversial \$33 billion project to relocate the nation's capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan province on the island of Borneo has been [temporarily suspended](#). Not only will the massive development impact the region's relatively intact ecosystems and threaten wildlife like the critically endangered Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*), experts worry the influx of people will exacerbate social problems in an area with a long history of deadly conflicts between the Indigenous population and migrants from other parts of

Indonesia. Groundbreaking of a new state palace and government buildings was planned for 2021, but has been officially [put on hold](#) until the government gets a handle on the pandemic.

On a smaller scale, the contentious development of a [China-backed hydropower dam](#) on the island of Sumatra has also been halted. The \$1.6 billion project [threatens the only remaining habitat](#) of the recently described and critically endangered Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*). Critics hope the delay will provide them with enough time to end the project entirely.



Coral, damselfish and anemones in Komodo, Indonesia. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

Fisheries ministry under questionable leadership

As President Joko Widodo kicked off his second term in October 2019, one of the casualties from his cabinet was the experienced and highly regarded fisheries minister, Susi Pudjiastuti. She was replaced by Edhy Prabowo, an influential figure in the second-biggest coalition party. The move was [slammed by conservationists and maritime experts](#), who feared the change in leadership would lead to an unraveling of reforms initiated by Susi. These fears appear to have been at least partially borne out. Early in 2020, Edhy [reversed a ban](#) on the export of lobster larvae, a policy enacted by his predecessor to help restore the cratering population. He justified the policy by requiring exporters to raise and release 2% of their catch

back into the wild — twice the current claimed survival rate of baby lobsters in the wild.



Lobsters are a top commodity in the Indonesian fisheries sector. Image courtesy of the Indonesian Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries.

However, an independent [investigation](#) by *Tempo* magazine found that many of the new export contracts went to hastily formed businesses run by political cronies of the minister, including a previous fisheries ministry official who was fired in 2017 — for smuggling lobster larvae and laundering money.

Exports began almost immediately, a timeline critics say was impossibly quick for businesses operating through legal channels and adhering to the policies. An [investigation](#) by Mongabay also found that many of the exporters ignored the policy's requirements to partner with small fishers and invest in aquaculture farms.

After increased scrutiny, Edhy, two of his aides, and several other individuals were [arrested in November](#) for corruption. However, despite the environmental concerns and questionable motives behind the export policy, its fate [remains uncertain](#) as the incoming minister may let it continue after a reevaluation.

A week before his arrest, Edhy also [eased restrictions](#) on the use of seine and trawl nets, previously banned in Indonesian waters due to their role in depleting the country's fish stocks and damaging coral reefs.



Recently cut rainforest tree in Indonesia. Photo by Rhett A. Butler for Mongabay

Forestry sector a mixed bag

Indonesia is set to receive more than \$150 million from two funds as a reward for reducing carbon emissions from deforestation. The United Nations Green Climate Fund has approved a [\\$103 million](#) payout after the country reported it prevented 20.3 million tons of deforestation-related carbon emissions between 2014 and 2016 — although these claims have been [challenged by critics](#). Norway has indicated it is ready to pay Indonesia [\\$56 million](#) under a separate agreement between the two countries for reducing emissions in 2017, the first in a \$1 billion agreement signed a decade ago, but [repeatedly stalled](#) by challenges.

Meanwhile, a newcomer to the oil palm business has started clearing forests in the heart of the largest tract of intact rainforest in Asia for what is slated to become the [world's largest oil palm plantation](#). The Tanah Merah project, located in Papua, Indonesia, is almost twice the size of London, and [investigations into its permitting](#) have raised multiple troubling questions.

Elsewhere in Papua, an investigation by Mongabay and The Gecko Project into a “suspicious” [\\$22 million consultancy fee](#) has also shone a spotlight on permit acquisitions by the oil palm conglomerate Korindo, a company recently accused of [illegal burning](#) on the island.

As Indonesia’s least-developed province, [Papua](#) will likely continue to be one of the places to watch in 2021, with [plantations](#), [mining](#), and associated [road developments](#) steadily carving into the forest and the [Indigenous population’s land](#).

Correction: This article was amended Jan. 2, 2021 to clarify that Indonesia is set to receive \$56 million from the government of Norway for reducing deforestation.

Mongabay’s year-in-review series:

[Oceans](#) | [Environment](#) | [Indonesian palm oil](#) | [Notable conservation deaths](#) | [Rainforests](#) | [Indonesia’s environment](#) | [Madagascar’s environment](#) | [Notable conservation books](#) | [Mongabay’s most popular](#)

Banner image: A Bornean orangutan in Indonesia’s Central Kalimantan province, by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.