

Snapshot Confident Consumers



Pedestrians carrying shopping bags in San Francisco. The Conference Board was scheduled to release US consumer confidence figures on Tuesday. Bloomberg Photo/David Paul Morris

Conservation Erik Meijaard

Modifying Indonesia's Conservation Methods

People love lists. Type in "the 10 best ..." in your favorite search engine and a great number of options will result, varying from "...movies of all times," to "...spaghetti sauces," and also the rather amusing "10 Best Moments in Pro-Gaming History."

Such lists are sources of endless arguments. The race between Jimi Hendrix, Slash and Keith Richard as best electric guitar player is a toss-up and declaring any of them as winner would certainly lead to major ridicule.

And so it will be with my list of favorite Indonesian conservation projects. Of course, I will defend my chosen top three with tooth and nail, but undoubtedly many will disagree. The point is to generate debate.

What to look for in favorite projects? First, among the many failing Indonesian conservation initiatives, a project seeking my nomination would have to have success, at least in saving a species from near-extinction, or rescuing a forest that pretty much everyone else wants to destroy.

Second, it would be nice if the successes resulted in strong societal support, with people living around the project being happy with or at least accepting it. If people don't like it, the project would have to go on forever, requiring constant funding, efforts, political support etc.

Thirdly, it helps if the project didn't cost all that much. If you just throw enough cash at something, eventually something will stick and generate some positive outcomes. But with conservation funding being limited, the cheaper is certainly the better.

And finally, I have to know a fair bit about the project, as it is the only way for me to judge its qualities. So on that note of totally subjective assumptions, here is my top three list of conservation favorites.

Wehea, East Kalimantan

This community-based project managed to turn a 38,000-hectare timber concession into an area fully protected by communities from the local Wehea tribe.

The area boasts stunning forest with exciting species, such as clouded leopards and orangutans. The project has garnered strong support from, the local government, the community and local industries. Lately the project has had some management struggles, but for now the area looks

safe. No illegal logging nor hunting has been reported for years.

Harapan, Jambi, Sumatra.

This was the first Indonesian Ecosystem Restoration project, nearly 100,000 hectares of more or less degraded rainforest in a sea of oil palm and other plantations. The project was given a 95-year license to manage the conservation values in the area.

It wasn't cheap — you don't get forest-use licenses for free in Indonesia, even if they are for conservation. But the area is home to great wildlife; tigers, elephants — you name it.

However, there has been a fair share of troubles, with people trying to illegally encroach onto the land, but increasingly the project looks safe and is an excellent example of the restoration potential of degraded rain forests.

Sungai Wain, East Kalimantan.

In the late 1990s, pretty much everyone had given up on this 6,000-hectare forest just outside the city of Balikpapan. Illegal logging was rampant, people were all over the forest and fires burned much of the remainder.

Hard work by a small group of dedicated conservationists first extinguished the fires, then managed to get local government support for protection, and eventually convinced the army and police to hammer big spikes into trees so that illegal loggers would be deterred.

On a shoe-string budget, later supported by local government funding, an effectively protected area was created that maintains constant water flows to Balikpapan's oil industry (and thus prevents the city's economic collapse).

Honorable mentions

I can think of a few more apparent



If conservation by the authorities alone doesn't work well, why not develop new strategies in which the role of more competent groups is recognized?

successes, including the Bali starling project in Nusa Penida off of Bali; the massive Gunung Leuser ecosystem in northern Sumatra; the recently protected Batang Toru area, also in Sumatra; Ujung Kulon, Banten, and its surviving Javan rhinos; Nantu in Gorontalo province and its well-protected babirusas; and the amazing Sebangau National Park in Central Kalimantan, which would have been converted to oil palm if it hadn't been for the collective action of activists.

What is interesting is that all these greatest conservation successes are largely driven by non-governmental organizations or concerned people — not the central government. In fact, in my experience, a protected area or species solely managed by government authorities will almost invariably be in decline.

On reflection it appears that non-governmental conservation organizations run much of the show in Indonesian conservation, at least with regard to creating conservation success. A good example is the Kutai National park in East Kalimantan. Much of the park burned in the 1980s and 1990s, and the remainder was over-run by illegal loggers and farmers.

According to government documents, the park has a \$1 million annual budget, which translates into \$5 per hectare — pretty decent by most international standards. So, it is certainly not lack of funding that's challenging park management. Then why is park management still struggling to protect its forest and wildlife?

Indonesian conservation urgently needs better understanding of the conditions for success. If conservation by the authorities alone doesn't work well, why not develop new strategies in which the role of potentially more competent groups is formerly recognized? Wouldn't that be the performance-based government system that Indonesia is now trying to develop?

The fact that conservation is not easy is even more reason to look hard at who achieves what in Indonesian conservation and select only the most effective and efficient group to govern the country's threatened wildlife and habitats. A review of conservation roles and responsibilities is urgently needed.

Erik Meijaard is a conservation scientist coordinating the Borneo Futures initiative

The Thinker Johannes Nugroho

Mercy in Democracy

In a eulogy of recently deceased King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said: "At my request, the late king pardoned many Indonesian citizens who had been sentenced to death by Saudi courts."

His remark is a timely reminder that attempts made by any government to prevent the execution of its citizens in a foreign nation are part of routine diplomacy. And apparently neither Yudhoyono nor the Saudi government saw the request as an intrusion into Saudi Arabia's sovereignty. By contrast, a great portion of local media has portrayed attempts made by various foreign governments to plead clemency for their citizens on death row as an outlandish attack on Indonesia's sovereignty.

Egged on by the media frenzy over threats to our "judicial sovereignty," most Indonesian social media users have applauded the government's adamant stance on denying clemency to those sentenced to death in our courts. The subsequent recalls of the Dutch and Brazilian ambassadors following the execution of six drug traffickers swung the Indonesian public opinion further into the government's camp.

As common sense gives way to emotions, many of us have evidently forgotten that we ourselves take umbrage every time we learn an Indonesian national has been sentenced to death abroad.

It is surprising that the Dutch government decided to recall its ambassador from Jakarta, considering it did not take such action when Dutch engineer Johannes van Damme was hanged for heroin smuggling in 1994 by the Singaporean government. But over 20 years have passed since van Damme's execution, and so the sociopolitical circumstances in the Netherlands today cannot possibly be compared to those in the recent past.



The president must be aware that routine executions of criminals are not a characteristic of democratic countries

We should also understand that, although Singapore is widely admired for its orderliness and world-class standards of public service, it is not perceived as a working democracy. Despite the existence of elections in the small republic, the results have always been predictable. Civil liberties are also highly regulated there, effectively making freedom of speech something arbitrated by the government.

By juxtaposition, Indonesia's democracy — flawed as it may be — is seen as the most robust in Southeast Asia. More importantly, President Joko Widodo at first managed to generate a worldwide image as a leader with a strong commitment to democracy and human rights. Arguably, much of Joko's image as a defender of human rights is based on hope rather than on scrutiny of his performance in office.

The international media was also guilty of promoting this perception of Joko by portraying him as a man of the people and democracy. TIME magazine, placing Joko on its front cover last October, described the new president as "the new face of Indonesian democracy" and "the world's most modest national leader."

So, it was no wonder that most Western governments, perhaps rather naively, assumed that he was a leader who shared their values. Seen in this context, Joko's seemingly inhumane refusal to grant clemency to drug offenders on death row was something contrary to what people expected of him. His attitude towards capital punishment was likely formed long ago, but attracted no attention.

While wrong on human rights, the foreign media was accurate in predicting the Joko government's insularity, which is evident not just in its indifference to, if not anger at, foreign protests over the death penalty, but also in its foreign affairs directives. But the president must be aware that routine executions of criminals are not a characteristic of democratic countries.

Though Yudhoyono may not have had the prisoners on Indonesia's own death row in mind at the time, his praise of King Abdullah's mercifulness is indeed a potent reminder that mercy can legitimately be shown to people condemned to death.

Moreover, if an autocracy like Saudi Arabia can show mercy, why can't a beacon of democracy like Indonesia?

Johannes Nugroho, a writer from Surabaya, can be contacted at johannes@onacris.com.