

# Your letters: Deforestation is never temporary

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In an article published in The Jakarta Post on Nov. 16, the Forestry Ministry secretary-general Hadi Daryanto explained that people should not worry too much about deforestation in Indonesia, because it really was not as bad as portrayed in the media.

He commented on a recent study in the journal Science that showed Indonesia still had the world's fastest rate of deforestation. What scientists have failed to understand, according to Hadi, is that much of this deforestation was only temporary.

"Temporary deforestation" surely deserves a prize for the euphemism of the year.

It seems that what Hadi was referring to was the process of developing forestry plantations, or Hutan Tanaman Industri (HTI). He was quoted as saying that "temporary deforestation is, for example, logging activities within HTI, which will be restored after the timber harvesting period concludes".

There seems to be a mix-up of terms here though. Plantations are established in areas that were once covered in natural forest. In other words, plantations replace diverse ancient tropical rainforests with mono-cultural strands of mostly exotic species, such as introduced forms of Acacia or Eucalyptus.

In ecological terms, deforestation in natural forest areas is never temporary. It either occurs or it does not. There are no half measures. Once a natural forest is cut down, the species diversity drops to about 20 percent of what originally existed, and many of these are generalist or weedy species that can survive virtually anywhere.

The original species diversity will not be recovered unless the forests are left alone for centuries. A global review of the impact of deforestation published in 2011 in the journal Nature was very clear about this.

Also, in environmental terms, deforestation is never temporary. The environmental services provided by natural forests greatly exceed those provided by mono-cultural plantations. This includes services such as flood buffering, erosion control, temperature regulation, carbon storage and

provision of a wide range of non-timber forest products to communities that depend on these forests for their livelihoods.

Our studies in Borneo published in the journal PLOS ONE show that these communities are seriously concerned about the impacts of deforestation.

There is legal confusion about what a forest is, with some definitions including everything vaguely resembling a stand of trees: natural forests, naturally regenerated forests, planted mixed forests and mono-cultural plantations.

Some have even argued to include oil palm plantations in the 'forest' definition.

Let it be clear though that whatever the legal definition of a forest is, in ecological and environmental terms deforestation of natural forests is permanent, never temporary.

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