



Indonesia Sustainable Development News Digest

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The *Indonesia Sustainable Development News Digest* is a biweekly collection of summaries of articles related to conservation, the environment, and sustainability in Indonesia that have appeared in print or online in local, regional, and global English-language media. We welcome comments, suggestions, and corrections. To learn more about us and to access previous editions of the News Digest, please visit our website at www.starlingresources.com. If you would like to add colleagues or friends to our distribution list or unsubscribe, please contact us at newsdigest@starlingresources.com.

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A. Marine and Fisheries

[Seaweed farmers in eastern Indonesia struggle in a changing climate](#)

—Jaya Barends, *Mongabay*, 23 July 2023

Climate change is shifting monsoon patterns in Indonesia, impacting seaweed farmers who depend on predictable winds for their planting strategy. *Eucheuma cottonii* seaweed, widely used in food and cosmetics, represents a significant industry for Indonesia accounting for 38% of the global supply of red seaweed. The value of the global seaweed market exceeded US\$4 billion in 2017 and is expected to surpass US\$9 billion by 2024, with *E.*

cottonii accounting for 90% of this market. But climate change is threatening Indonesia's seaweed industry. Rising sea surface temperatures are leading to slower growth and increased bacterial infestations, damaging the crop and reducing its economic viability. To cope with changing conditions, farmers have adopted new techniques like raising seaweed ropes on sunny and windy days to delay bacterial growth. Nevertheless, early harvests are necessary to avoid infestations altogether, resulting in reduced income for farmers.

[Grant awarded to develop AI-based tools to aid Indonesian seaweed farmers](#)

—*TheFishSite*, 18 July 2023

Through its Knowledge Partnership Program, the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is funding a Griffith Asia Institute (GAI) led research project that aims to revolutionize seaweed production monitoring in Indonesia using cutting-edge AI-based tools. Seaweed farming represents Indonesia's largest marine aquaculture industry and involves 62,000 coastal households across the archipelago, yet the country lacks accurate production data, which hampers evidence-based policy making. While satellite imagery has proven effective for land-based assessments, its application for marine aquaculture over vast areas remains untapped. This research will focus on developing advanced computer vision and machine-learning tools tailored for analyzing satellite imagery that will enable monitoring of seaweed production, complemented by ground-truthing methods using oceanographic measurements and farm production diaries. The project also aims to explore community perceptions of climate variability and their resilience strategies to identify interventions that will build climate change resilience and alleviate the impact of unpredictable weather patterns on seaweed production losses.

[Indonesian coast guard seizes Iranian-flagged tanker](#)

—*TheJakartaPost*, 11 July 2023

An Iranian-flagged vessel named MT Arman 114 was seized by Indonesian coast guards in early July for engaging in illicit transshipment of crude oil with Cameroon-flagged vessel MT S Tinos in the North Natuna Sea, during which it also violated other maritime regulations including falsifying its automatic identification system (AIS) as well as dumping oil waste into the sea. MT Arman was seized in Malaysian waters carrying 272,569 metric tonnes of crude oil worth Rp 4,6 trillion (US\$304 million) after both vessels attempted to escape Indonesian authorities. A 'shadow fleet' of tankers carrying oil from sanctioned Iran, Russia and Venezuela have been avoiding detection by transferring cargoes in the Singapore Strait. The vessels used are usually old and uninsured, which has led to an increase in the number of oil spills and accidents in the ocean over the past few years. The Maritime Security Agency's Vice Admiral Aan Kurnia vowed that Indonesian coast guards would strengthen patrols in Indonesian waters to provide a deterrent against future violations and protect maritime territory.

B. Forests and Land Use

[Most Indonesian palm oil firms not sharing land with small farmers as required: audit](#)

—Hans Nicholas Jong, *Mongabay*, 24 July 2023

Only 21% of Indonesian palm oil companies are compliant with the mandatory requirement to allocate 20% of their concessions to smallholder farmers under the sharing scheme known as "plasma," according to official data from the government's audit agency. The plasma scheme was introduced in the 1980s and made mandatory in 2007 to ensure that rural communities benefit from nearby large plantations, including training, supplies, guaranteed buyers for their

oil palm fruit, and eventual land title. However, media and NGO reports have highlighted the lack of proper implementation of the scheme, with a predicted 965,000 hectares of legally required plasma land not being allocated to communities. The government data on oil palm plantations is highly fragmented and inconsistent, making it challenging to evaluate compliance. In April, President Joko Widodo established a task force, consisting of representatives from various government agencies including the government's audit agency BKPK, to address the findings of the audit and improve the management of palm oil from upstream to downstream, including plasma.

[Indonesia slammed for 'bowing down' in amnesty for illegal oil palm estates](#)

—Hans Nicholas Jong, *Mongabay*, 20 July 2023

The Indonesian government is granting amnesty to millions of hectares of illegally established oil palm plantations in forest areas, justifying the move by claiming there are too many to handle otherwise. A 2013 law prohibits activities like oil palm cultivation and mining in forest areas, but numerous companies have ignored this regulation, resulting in 3.37 million hectares of illegal plantations in Indonesia. Critics argue that legalizing these plantations rewards environmental violations and prioritizes corporate interests over the environment. Activists and some lawmakers believe the government should take legal action instead of accommodating operators with amnesty. Contrary to the government's claim, there have been cases where illegal plantations were taken over by the state, suggesting that legal actions are possible. The government has introduced amnesty schemes over the years, extending grace periods and replacing criminal sanctions with administrative penalties, raising concerns about proper palm oil management and accountability. The deadline for operators to apply for amnesty is Nov 2, 2023, and approximately 237,511 hectares have been legalized so far.

[Indonesia claims record-low deforestation, but accounting raises questions](#)

—Hans Nicholas Jong, *Mongabay*, 18 July 2023

Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry data shows a steady decline in annual deforestation rates since 2017, with the lowest rate in over 30 years recorded in 2021-2022. The general trend of slowing forest loss in Indonesia is also supported by other data sources such as tree cover loss data available on the Global Forest Watch (GFW) platform managed by the World Resources Institute (WRI). However, a closer look exposes some disparities in the data, which stem from differences in methodology and definitions of forest and deforestation. To address these data differences, the forestry ministry and WRI signed an agreement in February this year to collaborate on a joint analysis and support Indonesia's target of turning its forests into a net carbon sink by 2030. Despite the controversial methodologies, Indonesia has significantly reduced deforestation as evident in GFW data, which also identifies Indonesia as the country that has achieved the greatest reduction in primary forest loss in recent years.

[USAID Signs a Bilateral Agreement with the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry](#)

—Press Release, *USAID*, 17 July 2023

USAID and Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry have launched a new climate and conservation partnership to support Indonesia's Forestry and Other Land Use Net Sink 2030 Operational Plan, vital for meeting its Paris Agreement commitments. The agreement aims to enhance low-carbon development, resilience to climate risks, and biodiversity conservation by focusing on preventing forest degradation, rehabilitating mangroves and peatlands, and protecting Indonesia's diverse wildlife. It builds on Indonesia's progress in reducing deforestation over the past seven years. USAID plans to contribute up to \$50 million

over five years, subject to funding availability, to achieve the agreement's climate and biodiversity goals. The partnership reflects the shared vision of President Biden and Indonesian President Joko Widodo, bolstering the U.S.-Indonesian Strategic Partnership and their commitment to tackling the climate crisis.

C. Biodiversity, Conservation, and Protected Area

[On Indonesia's Seram Island, a massive oil find lies beneath sacred land](#)

—Chris Belseran, Martha Dianti, *Mongabay*, 25 July 2023

The Bati Indigenous people of Seram, Indonesia, are facing uncertainty and fear as prospectors explore their ancestral land for hydrocarbons. PT Balam Energy, a subsidiary of Australia's Lion Energy, conducted seismic surveys on Seram's complex geological formations, indicating vast untapped oil and gas reserves. However, the concerned Bati community views the exploration as disturbing their sacred sites, with elders interpreting dreams of the village flooding as a warning from ancestors. The Bati have long stewarded the land, considering it intrinsic to their identity. Opposition to the drilling has sparked protests and advocacy from civil society activists and Indigenous rights groups, who argue that the government's recognition of customary rights is undermined by its policies. Despite permits from the central government, the Bati community demands protection of their land and culture, emphasizing their wish to coexist with nature without modernization or modification.

[Fear of Losing Orangutans](#)

—Erwan Hermawan, *Tempo*, 17 July 2023

The Batang Toru ecosystem in South Tapanuli, North Sumatra is the last remaining habitat of the Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*)— a unique species of orangutan definitively identified in 2017. Their habitat stretches over 163,000 hectares which over the last decade, has been progressively encroached on by the Martabe gold mine and the Batang Toru hydropower plant (PLTA). Researchers are concerned that the population of 800 Tapanuli orangutans in 2018 are slowly disappearing from the area as their habitat disappears. Based on spatial analysis by Greenpeace Indonesia and the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi), both concession areas overlap with the Batang Toru ecosystem, home to the Tapanuli orangutans, the Sumatran tiger, tapirs, and 60 other types of mammals. According to a local resident, the PLTA site used to be covered in fruit trees, which is why orangutans nested there. But since construction began in 2016, the orangutans have been pushed closer to the surrounding settlements and today, are frequently sighted looking for food in locals' gardens.

D. Climate Change, Energy, and Mining

[Nuclear pioneers press ahead with plans for Indonesia island frontier](#)

—Nopri Ismi, *Mongabay*, 24 July 2023

PT Thorcon Power Indonesia, a subsidiary of Singapore-based firm ThorCon International, plans to build a 500 MW demonstration nuclear power plant on Gelasa Island in Bangka-Belitung province, Indonesia. The plant's power source will be thorium, a natural element more abundant in nature than other nuclear fuels. It is also a common by-product of Indonesia's mining operations. ThorCon claims the project's electricity generation would cost 3 cents per kilowatt-hour, helping diversify Indonesia's grid with a technology emitting no

direct carbon emissions. However, researchers and environmental activists are concerned about potential environmental harm to Gelasa Island's conservation value. The island has mangrove forests, coral reefs, and diverse marine life that could be at risk due to the development. The island's spatial plan status has changed from conservation status in 2014, to nature reserve in 2019, to tourism zone in 2020, and finally officially designated for the thorium power plant in 2023.

[UK Helps Indonesia Put Price on Carbon Ahead of Bourse Launch in September](#)

—Jayanty Nada Shofa, *JakartaGlobe*, 24 July 2022

Indonesia and the UK have signed an implementing arrangement to assist Indonesia in establishing a carbon pricing mechanism in light of its goal of launching a carbon exchange later this year. The arrangement follows an MoU signed during Bali's G20 Summit last year, where the UK committed US\$3.5 million to provide policy studies and recommendations for Indonesia's carbon pricing initiative. Indonesia issued a presidential regulation on carbon pricing in 2021, intending to implement a cap-and-trade system, allowing businesses to trade greenhouse gas emission allowances and use carbon offsets to compensate for emissions elsewhere. Indonesia's Chief Investment Minister, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan, expressed that implementing carbon pricing and establishing a carbon market could result in annual trading values between US\$1 billion and US\$15 billion. The country plans to launch the carbon exchange in September, with the Financial Services Authority (OJK) overseeing trading activities. The collaboration with the UK through this UK PACT program aims to support Indonesia's climate mitigation efforts, including its NDCs and net-zero emissions target by 2060.

[Singapore looks elsewhere amid doubt over RI green power export](#)

—Vincent Fabian Thoman, *TheJakartaPost*, 18 July 2023

Singapore is exploring alternative sources of "green electrons," electricity produced from renewable energy, as its discussions with Indonesia for clean energy imports remain uncertain. Singapore's Senior Minister, Teo Chee Hean, stated that officials from the city-state have visited other ASEAN countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, to explore potential partnerships. The 2030 Green Plan goals and 2050 net-zero target of Singapore require importing clean energy since its renewable energy potential is limited. Indonesia has sent mixed signals about exporting renewable power, with a ban on clean power exports in the past. While Singapore is open to considering imports from Indonesia, it is also looking into other countries like Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, all of which have made progress in renewable energy development. However, the proximity and existing infrastructure make Indonesia a potential key supplier for Singapore's clean energy demand. The Indonesian government is urged to address red tape and accelerate the transition away from coal to capitalize on this market opportunity.

[A Possible Quick End to Nickel Boom](#)

—Yopie Hidayat, *Tempo*, 17 July 2023

Blessed with substantial nickel reserves and a nickel export ban, the Indonesian government aims to position Indonesia as a major electric car battery production center to meet the surging global demand. However, Indonesia faces challenges due to its limited bargaining power, as nickel is just one of the five crucial elements required for manufacturing car batteries. Furthermore, Indonesia's nickel falls under class 2, necessitating processing with a technology that has a significant carbon footprint before it can be used in batteries. The landscape of the electric vehicle battery industry is also shifting, with a growing focus on lithium ferro-phosphate (LFP) batteries, which eliminate the need for nickel altogether. LFP batteries are gaining popularity due to their cost-effectiveness, safety, and longer lifespan.

For instance, during Q1 of 2022, nearly half of Tesla's produced cars utilized LFP batteries. As a result, the potential nickel boom in Indonesia may prove short-lived.

E. Pollution and Waste

[Plastic waste is everywhere - and countries must be held accountable for reducing it](#)

—Editorial, *Nature*, 12 July 2023

Two papers published in *Nature* this week reveal that the estimated 400 million tonnes of plastic waste generated worldwide annually have infiltrated even the most remote and pristine areas of the planet. These findings are contributing to important discussions currently underway at the United Nations, where countries are working together to develop a global and legally binding plastics treaty aimed at eliminating plastic pollution. At present, nations are not held accountable for their pledges on behalf of their plastic producers, exporters, and recyclers—and this needs to change. However, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) told *Nature* that there is no dedicated expert group focusing on measurement or accountability aspects at these talks, which is concerning. Due at the end of 2024, the plastics treaty is being held to a tight schedule, which poses a risk that negotiators could settle for a treaty that is lacking in substantial requirements in monitoring and compliance. The time between now and the next session in November presents an urgent opportunity to establish an expert group to ensure monitoring and compliance represent an integral part of the discussions.

F. Investment and Finance

[Nusantara, the new gateway for Malaysia-Indonesia cooperation](#)

—Zuhairy Fauzy, *TheJakartaPost*, 19 July 2023

Indonesia's President Joko Widodo is actively promoting foreign investment in the country's future new capital, Nusantara, which will replace Jakarta as the center of administration by 2024. During his visits to Malaysia and Singapore, Jokowi emphasized Indonesia's close ties with its regional partners and invited foreign entrepreneurs to invest in Nusantara. The Indonesian government is offering attractive incentives to draw investors, with priority given to essential infrastructure development. Malaysia, which shares a 1,900 km-long border on the island, stands to benefit economically and can capitalize on opportunities for increased flight networks, cross-border ecotourism efforts, and cooperation in the oil and gas industry. Moreover, Malaysia's focus on eco-friendly solutions aligns with Indonesia's efforts in promoting green technology and sustainability in Nusantara's development. The inauguration of Nusantara presents an opportune time for Malaysia-Indonesia relations, fostering greater politico-economic integration between the two ASEAN powerhouses.

[It's up to business: Singapore says on RI's new capital investment](#)

—Yohana Belinda, *TheJakartaPost*, 17 July 2023

Singapore and Indonesia signed a memorandum of understanding in March regarding cooperation to help Nusantara achieve its green and smart vision. Singapore's experience in urban planning and managing infrastructure including in areas related to sustainability and managing environmental challenges, presents a useful opportunity for Indonesia's new capital. The project is estimated to cost Rp 466 trillion (US\$32.6 billion) with the state budget only planning to cover 19% of these costs, the rest is to be funded by public-private

partnerships and private investments. The Singaporean government has expressed its full support and will facilitate any companies interested in investing in the project—the Indonesian government has already received 20 letters of intent from the Singaporean private sector about investing in Nusantara. But further direction is still required, says Singapore's Second Minister for Foreign Affairs Maliki Osman, “[We are] waiting for them to let us know how they think we can be of value to the project”.

[Indonesia, Turkey pledge stronger economic ties](#)

—A. Muh. Ibnu Aqil, *TheJakartaPost*, 17 July 2023

Indonesia and Turkey celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations in 2025 and on the sidelines of high-level ASEAN meetings in Jakarta this month, Indonesian foreign minister Retno LP Marsudi and Turkish Foreign minister Hakan Fidan committed to strengthen bilateral ties on economy and security issues, including expediting the Indonesia-Turkey Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which was launched in 2017. Trade between the two countries reached nearly US\$ 3 billion in 2022, a 29% increase from the previous year, but Fidan noted that both countries can work harder to reach the annual trade target of US\$10 billion. Investment and trade projects discussed ranged from electric bus manufacturing to wood processing to infrastructure development of Indonesia's new capital city Nusantara.

G. Human Rights and Gender Equality

[Police to take firm action against officers involved in organ trade](#)

—Nur Janti, *TheJakartaPost*, 23 July 2023

The Jakarta Police are investigating an illegal organ trade involving a cop and an immigration officer who allegedly helped traffickers send 122 Indonesians to Cambodia to sell their kidneys. Both officers were arrested along with 10 traffickers who are part of a human trafficking ring preying on vulnerable job seekers. National Police chief Gen. Listyo Sigit Prabowo said the police would not hesitate to take firm action against their own officers if found guilty of involvement in such schemes. The cop is charged with obstructing investigation under the Human Trafficking Law and allegedly received \$40,000 for his role. The immigration officer is accused of abusing his power and falsifying documents for victims' travel. The victims, lured through social media, agreed to sell their organs due to financial difficulties caused by the pandemic. All 122 victims have returned to Indonesia, but some are still being observed by the police's medical team. Authorities are continuing to crack down on human smuggling syndicates, which have been increasingly uncovered over the past months. Since June, more than 2,100 victims of human trafficking have been rescued, with over 800 suspects named.

[Harassment, Threats, Prompt cancellation of LGBT Conference in Indonesia](#)

—Ryan Thoreson, *HumanRightsWatch*, 19 July 2023

The ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, a regional organization for LGBT activists, has canceled its annual Queer Advocacy Week in Jakarta, Indonesia, due to harassment and death threats from Muslim conservatives. The event was planned in coordination with Indonesian group Arus Pelangi and the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development. Anti-LGBT groups in Indonesia called for the government to prevent the conference, leading to public demonization of LGBT individuals in the media and on social media platforms. This cancellation comes amidst a backdrop of increasing anti-LGBT harassment in Indonesia, including the adoption of a revised Criminal Code that effectively criminalizes same-sex

activity and violates international human rights obligations. Indonesian officials are urged to investigate threats against LGBT activists and hold perpetrators accountable, while adopting measures to protect fundamental freedoms and address the growing anti-LGBT sentiment in the country, starting with the decriminalization of same-sex conduct and repeal of discriminatory legal provisions.

I. Strategic moves

[Jokowi installs more loyalists in Cabinet shake-up](#)

—Dio Suhenda, *TheJakartaPost*, 18 July 2023

Indonesian President Joko Widodo introduced a Cabinet shake-up with just over a year left of his second term in office, appointing loyalists and supporters to key positions. The move is seen as an effort to consolidate power and secure his legacy beyond the 2024 elections. Critics argue that the reshuffle is influenced by Jokowi's political agenda and is aimed at ensuring support and motivation for the administration's remaining projects. "All of them [were inaugurated] with the main purpose of hitting the ground running," he said at the Presidential Palace in Central Jakarta. Some speculate that the reshuffle might indicate Jokowi's preference for Gerindra Party chairman Prabowo Subianto to succeed him, rather than supporting Ganjar Pranowo, fellow politician from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), raising questions about Jokowi's political alliances and future succession plans.

II. Blazing concerns

[Muslim women's group to reopen oxygen homes if Indonesia wildfires intensify](#)

—*Mongabay*, 24 July 2023

Indonesia's oldest women's Islamic organization, 'Aisyiyah, is taking proactive steps in Kalimantan and Sumatra to create clean air sanctuaries in preparation for potential wildfires caused by a strengthening El Niño. Through its environmental arm, LLHPB, the organization aims to safeguard communities near forest fires and raise awareness about climate change. During the 2019 wildfires that affected 3.1 million hectares of land in Indonesia, 'Aisyiyah volunteers operated Oxygen Homes equipped with air purifiers, providing a safe haven from the hazardous haze outside and ensuring access to clean air. A study suggests that the 2015 Southeast Asia wildfires may have resulted in 100,000 early deaths. With El Niño conditions predicted to strengthen until October, there are growing concerns about the risks of wildfires on Indonesia's tropical peatlands. While the government has implemented measures to prevent wildfires, the first El Niño event since 2019 poses a significant test for the country's wildfire preparedness and raises concern for those in vulnerable areas.

[Half of fire risk peatland in concession areas, report says](#)

—A. Muh. Ibnu Aqil, *TheJakartaPost*, 23 July 2023

Approximately half of Indonesia's peatlands are at high risk of wildfires, especially those located within privately owned oil palm and pulpwood concession areas. The draining of peatlands to convert them into suitable land for these plantations renders the peat dry and highly flammable. Central Kalimantan is particularly vulnerable, with 1.2 million hectares of high-risk peatland, nearly half of which overlaps with concession areas. The El Niño weather phenomenon further increases the risk of wildfires during the dry season. While it is the

responsibility of concession owners to extinguish fires on their land, the government can intervene if necessary, potentially leading to legal consequences for companies that fail to prevent or control fires. Palm oil companies associated with the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) may have an advantage in fire prevention efforts, as RSPO alerts them when hotspots are detected near their concession areas. The government has initiated cloud seeding to induce rain and prevent fires ahead of the dry season peak.

On burning-prone Borneo, planners work to fireproof Indonesia's new capital

—Mongabay Haze Beat, *Mongabay*, 17 July 2023

Indonesia will be using drones as part of their early-warning system for wildfires around Nusantara, its new capital city on the island of Borneo. Surveillance from the sky can help to identify where potential fires may occur, sources of water to extinguish it, and the best evacuation routes to be used. With a potentially disastrous El Nino season predicted, city planners met earlier this year to discuss wildfire risks at the 2,560 km² new capital estate. Although potential hotspots were identified, they are located far from the construction areas. Part of the rationale for choosing East Kalimantan as the place for the new capital was its lower vulnerability to wildfire damage. Nusantara is located far away from flammable peatland areas further west in South, Central and West Kalimantan provinces, and during the dry-season, winds typically blow from the east, pushing any potential haze pollution away from the city. Indonesia's fire fighting capacity consists of Manggali Agni, the government fire department run by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, and is supported by community firefighting volunteers known as Masyarakat Peduli Api.

End

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