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The Manokwari Declaration: Challenges ahead in conserving 70% of Tanah Papua's forests



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Abstract: The Manokwari Declaration is an unprecedented pledge by the governors of Indonesia's two New Guinea provinces to promote conservation and become SE Asia's new Costa Rica. This is an exciting, yet challenging endeavour that will require working on many fronts that transcend single disciplines. Because Indonesian New Guinea has the largest expanse of intact forests in SE Asia, large-scale conservation pledges like the Manokwari Declaration will have a global impact on biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation.

Keywords: biodiversity; conservation planning; indigenous peoples; policy

New Guinea is the largest tropical island in the world, with >75% of its forests still intact (Mittermeier et al., 1998; Newbold et al., 2016). It has the greatest habitat diversity of SE Asia, ranging from coral reefs to snow-capped mountains, and a rich fauna and flora with more than 600 bird species and 15,000 plant species, many of which are endemic (Marshall and Beehler, 2007). Its vast forests are globally important for climate change mitigation, but extensive concessions assigned for palm oil (Franky and Moragan, 2015), timber (Klute, 2008) and improper infrastructure development, place the region under great risk of large-scale deforestation (Brun et al., 2015).

On October 10th 2018, the Governors of Indonesia's two New Guinea Provinces signed the *Manokwari Declaration* (Manokwari Declaration, 2018), committing to the conservation 70% of the forest cover for the western half of the island¹ (Box 1). This represents a significant step forward, building on the momentum of the 2011 declaration of Tambrau as a "Conservation District" (Fatem et al., 2018) and the 2015 declaration of Papua Barat as a "Conservation Province". Still, while policy formalization has advanced swiftly, there have also been setbacks. The provincial government, in its 2015 revision of the provincial zoning map, reduced the area of protected forest from c. 53,000 km² to 33,000 km² and nearly doubled the area designated for agricultural development by reclassifying 20,000 km² of protected forest as agricultural zones (Jong, 2018).

These discrepancies highlight the need for close monitoring and transparent indicators so that the provinces' commitments to conservation actions are both implemented and sustained. Illegal activities will have to be monitored closely, and the offending parties held accountable. For example, massive deforestation in March-April 2018 in PT MJR — a palm oil concession controlled by the Hayel Saeed Anam Group — included an area zoned for protection where development is prohibited (Greenpeace, 2018). Similarly, Korindo — the largest palm oil company in Papua — cleared and burned 30,000 hectares of forests from 2013 to 2016, despite the fact that burning to clear forests is illegal and prohibited under Indonesian Law No. 32/2009 (Aidenvironment, 2016). The Papua Atlas, developed by the Center for International Forestry Research, will be an important tool to ensure transparency by tracking real-time developments in plantation areas (Fraser, 2018). Besides improved monitoring and better compliance with the law, overcoming major knowledge gaps on land ownership systems, improving markets for commercialization of native products, and engaging indigenous communities in spatial planning efforts, will all be critical elements of an effective conservation effort (Steni and Nepstad, 2018).

With high poverty (28% vs. 11% national average) and illiteracy rates (34% vs. 2%) (Indonesian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), alternative economic models that suit the unique conditions of the region and that protect the customary rights of Papua's 307 ethnic groups (Tabloid Jubi, 2018) will also be needed. The local government has prioritized infrastructure development, and an ambitious road building program is underway to deliver healthcare, education, and sustainable economic opportunities to remote areas (World Bank, n.d). But road building increases the risk of potential hotspots of deforestation, and its impacts may include biodiversity loss, detrimental changes to local communities, and increased carbon emissions (Sloan et al., 2018), so better plans for infrastructure expansion, and enforcement of conservation laws will be of paramount importance. Recently, roads encroached several conservation areas, and put the Outstanding Universal Value of the Lorentz UNESCO World Heritage Site at risk (UNESCO, 2015). Continuous monitoring and capacity-building in Papua's conservation areas — which are understaffed and underfinanced (Marshall and Beehler, 2007) — will thus be essential.

¹ The Indonesian half of the island of New Guinea is comprised of two provinces, Papua and Papua Barat, collectively referred to as *Tanah Papua* (Land of Papua).

Box 1: The Manokwari Declaration

1. Commitment to the goal of sustainable development, including the review of current spatial planning efforts, to achieve minimal 70% under conservation area,
2. Protect the rights and strengthen the role of Indigenous peoples,
3. Enforce laws, establish a new moratorium for plantations, and review the permits and procedures of existing concessions,
4. Work with the central government to develop fiscal mechanisms for increasing financial investments that incentivize conservation and sustainable development,
5. Enhance information management systems and transparency,
6. Establish a natural history museum and botanical gardens to increase the appreciation for the region's biodiversity and culture,
7. Strengthen capacity-building efforts related to regional planning, protected area management, community engagement in conservation programs, and the development of appropriate school curricula,
8. Support indigenous communities to develop appropriate economic development activities and increase access to markets
9. Promote the establishment of an independent institution to resolve environmental conflicts, and enhance law enforcement of existing regulations
10. Review the status and establish new conservation areas and corridors, including those covering mangrove areas, sago marshes, peatlands, and areas of high biodiversity value,
11. Evaluate the environmental impact of existing infrastructure and ensure that new infrastructure development is environmentally appropriate and based on sustainable development principles,
12. Accelerate government regulation to enhance food security efforts,
13. Build partnerships (global, national, local) and appropriate coordination mechanisms to promote investment models for sustainable growth,
14. Continue existing cooperation among civil society organizations and indigenous peoples and increase women's capacity and the capacity of indigenous leaders and organizations.

The Manokwari Declaration provides an exciting blueprint for conservation and sustainable development for Tanah Papua. However, realizing these ambitious goals will require substantial investment in human resources, extraordinary commitment from all parties concerned, improved science and monitoring, and more effective law enforcement. If achieved, Tanah Papua will set a compelling example for the rest of the world.

Acknowledgement: Photograph Credits: Timothy G. Laman.

Picture title: *Greater Bird-of-Paradise, Aru Islands*

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