

The Environment – Protection and Progress

By

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Thankyou, I am happy to be here. I was so surprised when I received the invitation from Hitachi to deliver a speech. As an environmental activist I am used to criticizing and attacking transnational companies. They hate me and are scared of me but Hitachi doesn't seem to be – they even invited me to come here..... there must be something wrong with Hitachi!

I will speak about the S.E. Asian environment but particularly I would like to engage you in discussion about the issue of forests in S.E. Asia. Why? Because it has interconnected issues with S.E. Asia but also it has a connection with Japan too, that's why it is important for us as '*people to people*' to think about this issue together.

S.E. Asia from an ecological point of view is actually one; many, many years ago this continent was actually one, covered by ice and then when it melted the continent became the archipelago of S.E. Asia. The region has a very distinct endemic species (which means it can only be found in this area) but is also very related ecologically to the mainland of S.E. Asia. This region is mostly covered by tropical moist forest, tropical broad leaf forest or rainforest – it also has one of the largest tracks of mangrove forest and one of the richest biodiversities (called a 'mega-diversity region').

There are several ecosystems found in this area – some parts have tropical moist forest, others dry forest such as on the Eastern and Southern parts of Indonesia. The biodiversity richness of S.E. Asia can be seen in its mammals, birds and higher plants. Some of the plants may contain DNA or chemicals that are needed to cure diseases such as HIV. In fact, some of the most recent research has identified a rare chemical compound in the Borneo forests that could be a cancer cure.

Indonesia is one of the richest in endemic species, followed by the Philippines because they are archipelagoes. In addition Rafflesia plants, nocturnal mammals and other flora and fauna can be found in the forests of Kalimantan, Borneo that are now being penetrated by logging.

S.E. Asia is also one of the most *culturally* diverse regions in Asia. In Indonesia alone, more than 500 ethnic groups can be found. The most important issue is the indigenous people – we have one of the highest numbers that live mostly in tropical moist forest. So their existence depends on this forest. One example is the Karen people in Chiangmai (Thailand) and Burma. They have their own form of agricultural technology which has been forgotten about. They are dependent on the characteristics of the soil and ecosystem. As a result there are patches of cultivation that allow genetically diverse plants and species to flourish; some areas are in the second generation of succession, some are very newly developed. In place of this forgotten understanding and knowledge, we in fact have introduced a new type of cultivation – “monoculture cultivation”, which is in conflict with the tropical ecosystem.

What has happened to our forests? In areas except for Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, all natural forests are under heavy deforestation. Indonesia has the largest track of tropical moist forest in the region but also *the highest deforestation rate*. Deforestation in Thailand and the Philippines is low but that is not because it has stopped – it is because it has *exhausted* its natural forest. The forests that exist in the Philippines and Thailand are only in the protected areas and perhaps on the border between Thailand and Burma – and this is now being heavily logged. There is very little protected forest left.

What is the major cause of deforestation? The subject has become a battle between the environmentalists like me and organizations such as the government, the international donor agencies, the UNDP, the FAO, World Bank and the ADB. This year, in the new Millennium, we finally won! In this year’s report, the World Bank and ADB have finally acknowledged that the main cause of deforestation in this region is due to *commercial logging*. It is not due to the local communities.

Someone has raised a question as to how local communities can be involved in environmental management. Actually, in the main parts of natural moist forest in the S.E.

Asian region, the communities have taken part in caring for the forest. But they are then driven out from their homes that are then taken over by commercial loggers. So commercial logging is the biggest cause of deforestation.

The second biggest cause is conversion for development projects. This is particularly prevalent in Indonesia with transmigration, big dam projects like the Bakun Dam in Malaysia, timber plantations and palm oil plantations (especially in the Malaysian peninsula and Sumatra).

The third largest cause is conversion for food crop agriculture, but this involves relatively small holders. Let me illustrate some other examples - cinnamon plantations in Sumatra where to get the bark, one has to cut the trees. Another culprit is the pulp and paper industry – this is rising in Indonesia in the last 10 years - and forest fires as mentioned by Mr. Simon Tay. This affected some 70 million people covering 6 countries. 1.7 million Hectares of forest were destroyed and at its height the smog covered an area of over 3200km. I would contend that not only Indonesian companies have been involved in the burning that caused the haze– we have names of Malaysian and Singaporean companies that have also been involved in the plantations.

Some facts about logging in S.E. Asia: this is very important regarding the connection between the S.E. Asian region and Japan. Formerly Philippines was a major timber exporter and now they are a net importer of timber. You will no longer find a native species of timber in the Philippines.

Thailand stopped logging in 1990. Its logging companies are now roaming Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. The Philippines, when they stopped logging, came to Indonesia and became the principal loggers. The Indonesian wood-based industry is actually facing a shortfall in timber. More than 54 million cubic metres were supplied by illegal logging in 1998. It is predicted that lowland forest in Sumatra will be gone in 5 years, Kalimantan within 10 years. The Malaysian and Singapore timber industry are buying illegal lots from Indonesia.

Where does S.E. Asian timber go? About 40 per cent goes to Japan, the biggest consumer. Another bulk to the United States, the rest goes to Europe, South Korea,

Taiwan, China and Singapore. Japan is the only country in the world with an *increasing* volume of timber. Logging in Japan is very rigidly regulated. 70 percent of its territory is covered by forest. Japan, however, takes in a lot of Indonesian timber. In meetings in the Hague, Amsterdam about climate change, Japan has proposed to use its forests to account for “carbon sink”; an estimated 7 per cent of the country’s emissions of greenhouse gases are absorbed by Japan’s forests.

Is there any initiative to combat deforestation? We have been talking about this for two decades. Inter-governmental co-operation under ITTO was established in 1986; inter-governmental committee on forests under CSSD after the Rio Summit in 1992 and there has been an ongoing S.E. Asia forest fires cooperative – but are they effective? We have yet to see the results. Forest protection in S.E. Asia is seen as the answer. It is only effective in isolated patches. This method is too small to affect anything.

Can technology save the natural moist forests of SE Asia? Perhaps this is the challenge of the New Millennium. I will leave it to you to discuss.

***Blurbs:***

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