This is in spite of government regulations forbidding the use of fire for land clearing. In short: burning land is illegal! Yet fires are even raging in areas that have been designated as areas of national importance for environmental protection, such as the Tripa peatland that lies in the Leuser ecosystem. Further up the coast, areas are also burning that have been designated for protection according to the recent Presidential Instruction No. 10/2011: the so-called moratorium ordering the suspension of issuing new licenses for the conversion of primary forests and peatland.

These days, it is relatively easy to detect and document serious fires. Since late 2000, the US Terra and Aqua satellites carrying the MODIS fire detection sensor, have been detecting and publishing precise coordinates of fires all over the world. These data are freely available to anyone interested and can be easily downloaded from the Internet.

Between late 2000 and June 21, 2011, a total of more than 21,600 fires have been recorded in Aceh and North Sumatra provinces; nearly 42 percent of these fires were on peatland, despite peatland comprising only 4.8 percent of the total land area of the two provinces. Thus peatland was 14.4 times more likely to be burned than non-peatland during this period.

Unfortunately, much damage has already been done, as many of Sumatra's peatland has already been converted for plantations. Across the peatland on the east coast of North Sumatra, near the border with Riau, over 32 percent of all fires since 2000 occurred in 2005. The incidence of fires there has since declined, as plantations have already been established. Similarly, much of the coastland peatland from the southwestern coast of Aceh, all the way down to the border between North and West Sumatra, was burned between 2004 and 2009.

Although swathes of the Tripa peatland were cleared and burned in the 1990s, after 2000 most of the peatland along the rest of the west coast of Aceh were temporarily spared, largely because the separatist conflict in Aceh halted the activities of the large plantation companies. This changed after the Aceh peace accord in 2005, and by 2009 burning had accelerated dramatically. Based on the escalation of fires in the last few weeks, it is clearly continuing, with over 300 fires already recorded this year alone.

Why is the destruction of peatland bad? For hundreds of years, people have not converted forested areas in coastal peat swamps. The swamps act as huge sponges, helping to regulate water flows, preventing saltwater intrusion and stabilizing the coastline, and providing livelihoods for local people through fishing and the collection of non-timber forest products.

They also store huge amounts of carbon, the drying and burning of which contributes massively to global climate change. All these valuable long-term benefits are now being lost in favor of the short-term interests of a relatively small number of highly influential companies and individuals.

It is debatable whether growing oil palm and other plantation crops is even sustainable in these peat swamps. It is highly likely that 10 to 20 years from now, when the peat has subsided

below sea level, the top-heavy oil palms have toppled over, and uncontrollable flooding and seawater intrusion have taken their toll that these areas will become wasteland, unsuitable for either settlement or agriculture.

Millions of tons more carbon will have been released into the atmosphere, while local people will have to move, will be left jobless, and without the natural resources they had previously enjoyed for centuries.

Who is to blame? Local reporting of the fires and smoke, as often happens, has concentrated on describing the locations and dangers of the fires, and the attempts at trying to extinguish them. There is virtually no discussion of culpability. The impression is conveyed that this is yet another “natural” disaster.

But there is nothing even vaguely “natural” about it: it is 100 percent caused by people. By the Forestry Ministry officials who ignored recommendations by land-use planners in the 1980s and 1990s that peatland should be preserved, and instead handed out permits for the peat swamp forests to be converted. By the large oil palm plantations that dig the canals to drain the swamps, and use fire to clear the land prior to planting.

By the local and national government officials, and law enforcement agencies, who have always failed to impose any sanctions on companies that break the law by using fire, or converting peat that is 3 meters or more in depth (for instance, many of the peat layers in Tripa are more than 3 meters deep).

By local government officials in Aceh, who in recent years participated in land grabs and issued local licenses for plantations. Lastly, by all the rest of us, who have sat by and allowed this to happen under our very noses.

What can be done about it? Although huge tracts of peatland have already been damaged beyond repair, along the west coast of Aceh some of the peatland can still be saved.

All it needs is for the government to enforce its own policies, regulations and laws. It is easy these days to identify companies that have allowed burning on their land or are converting peat that is deeper than 3 meters; therefore, it should be relatively straightforward to revoke their licenses. District governments, that allow peatland conversion and may even be encouraging it, can be punished financially by withholding their funding.

The data and analyses that we have used are no secret. Nor are they difficult to obtain or understand. Unless the central government and the provincial governments with peatland areas take action now, the stated policy of Indonesia to protect peatland and reduce its massive carbon emissions, lies in tatters.

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