

Autonomy Watch: Policies blamed for deforestation in Nusakambangan

Local policies related to the authority over forestry management on the island of Nusakambangan have been blamed for damage to thousands of hectares of forest area. Nusakambangan is more notoriously known for its prisons. Law and Human Rights Ministry Director General for Correctional Facilities Untung Sugiyono said the damage to forests on Nusakambangan had impacted some 30 percent of the island's total forest area of some 16,000 hectares.

"To deal with the serious damage, involvement of various related formal institutions on the management of the forest needs to be done," Untung said on the sidelines of his recent visit to the island. He said the damage could endanger both the biodiversity on the island and even the utility of Nusakambangan as a correctional facility area.

The island is home to some 1,500 inmates.

Among other areas in the forest considered to have suffered most is the section on the western part of the island, which has been turned into a residential area. The area is under the administration of Kampung Laut district, comprising four subdistricts. Some 3,000 families, or 12,000 people, reside in the district. They continually look for fresh water to assist their agricultural activities.

These people, who were previously considered illegal but now have been formally acknowledged as residents by the Cilacap regency administration, have been accused of contributing to the damage in the Nusakambangan forest. Another factor considered thought to be responsible for the worrisome condition of Nusakambangan forestland includes the cement industry in the region.

"We need to involve all institutions having authority over the island if we really want to save Nusakambangan," Untung said. Rehabilitation efforts had been made to help address the condition, he said, but further evaluation was needed to analyze the effectiveness of the initiatives.

He said that he acknowledged there were certain outsiders who had significantly contributed to the damage to Nusakambangan's forests. He added, however, that there were also possibilities that local stakeholders – either aware or unaware – might have also contributed to the environmental damage.

"So, apart from correcting the outside parties, we have to correct ourselves first," Untung said. The Cilacap Natural Resource Conservation Agency (BKSDA) reported that 90 percent of the damage in Nusakambanga forestland was due to illegal logging, which has been rampant since 1999 following the fall of Soeharto regime in 1998. BKSDA Cilacap forest ranger coordinator Dedy Supriyanto said illegal logging accounted for damage in some 5,000 hectares on the island, while some 50 hectares had been impacted by limestone mining activities.

He said that as a result of the damage a number of rare plants and trees on Nusakambangan are disappearing from the forest. "Unless something is done about it, Nusakambangan could become barren in just 10 years," Dedy said.