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Environment Watch: Govt to pump money into embattled national park

The Forestry Ministry has earmarked Rp 250 billion (about US\$25 million) to establish a rare flora and fauna rehabilitation center in East Lampung's Way Kambas National Park (TNWK), whose lush forests and rare wildlife is under threat from rampant illegal logging, poaching and fishing.

Lampung Governor Sjachroedin Z.P. said the project was a part of the Lampung tourism development golden triangle program, whose three points were the Siger Tower in Bakauheni, South Lampung, Way Kambas National Park in East Lampung and Lumbok Ranau Lake in West Lampung.

"The government will also build the biggest veterinary hospital in Sumatra in TNWK, which is currently home to the Sumatran Rhino Refuge conservation center," Sjachroedin said on Friday. He said the Lampung Forestry Office was supporting TNWK's efforts to restore damaged forest areas in the park.

"The wild animals will be threatened if the forest is further depleted. One of the solutions is to curb the pace of deforestation," Sjachroedin said.

TNWK office head Awen Supranata said his office was currently rehabilitating the protected forest and protecting it from poaching, forest conversion, illegal fishing and logging and other illicit activities. According to Awen, TNWK has over the past two years retrieved more than 6,000 hectares of land within its borders that had been occupied by squatters for dozens of years. The squatters, originating from South Sulawesi, East Java, West Java, Banten and South Sumatra, had built homes and farms in TNWK.

TNWK has also evicted fishing settlements from Kualakampus, Muarasekapuk and Wako, and has driven out thousands of buffalo from the national park. The Indonesian Environment Forum's (Walhi) Lampung chapter director Hendrawan said he was doubtful the rehabilitation of TNWK would run smoothly and successfully. He said the wildlife and forest ecosystem would remain threatened as long as the government did not take firm action to crack down on illegal activities in the park.

"Many cases of timber theft have gone unresolved. Two years ago a TNWK employee was implicated in a timber theft case but was never prosecuted," Hendrawan said.

TNWK's forest conservation areas have seen forest coverage decline to 60 percent to 125,621 hectares due to illegal logging concentrated mostly in the park's lowland rainforest areas, which is 35 percent made up of undergrowth and tall grass.

To deceive forest rangers, loggers, who are generally residents living around TNWK, submerge the trees they have felled on the edges of river beds so that they are hidden from site.

When the coast is clear, they lift the timber from the river bed and transport it on trucks, covering the logs with sand to hide their true cargo.

A number of major rivers run through TNWK, including the Way Kanan, the Way Pegadungan and the Way Bungur. The park has said that the method of submerging timber in the rivers is the latest mode of illegal logging.