

C. Java forests benefit from unique approach

The area of community forests across the Central Java province has increased by 30,000 hectares annually for the last decade, thanks to the so-called prosperity approach that the provincial authority has implemented. Increasing the community forests was seen as the most viable solution for dealing with the limited area of state forests in the region. With only 647,000 hectares of state forests left, or 19.8 percent of the province's total land area, Central Java fell far short of meeting the minimum forested area of 30 percent as stipulated by the Law on Spatial Planning.

"It's apparently very difficult or almost impossible to expand the state forests. So, what we did was expand the community forests," Central Java Forestry Agency head Sri Puryono told The Jakarta Post recently. Thus, the prosperity approach was used to realize this goal. Through the approach, which focuses on increasing people's income by turning their fields into forests, residents are encouraged to plant hardwood species of trees such as teak and mahogany along with other smaller plants that can be cultivated under the trees.

"We suggested they also plant different trees with height gradations, for example coffee then salak [snake skin fruit] and then tubers," Sri said. Such a system, he said, enables the farmers to have monthly and mid-term earnings. They don't need to wait for a long time until they can harvest their timber to earn money. "We supervise them until they can actually harvest, so they build trust [in the program]."

The approach, according to Sri, proved to be effective in rapidly increasing the area of the community forests in Central Java from less than 100,000 hectares in 2000 to 425,000 hectares at present, about 12.5 percent of the province's total area. Combined with the state forests, this accounts for 32.3 percent of Central Java's total land area, making the province one of the most ideal regions in Indonesia. Sri said the approach was also effective in minimizing illegal logging activities in state forests, drastically decreasing the state's losses incurred by stolen timber from over Rp 50 billion in 2000 to about Rp 800 million last year.

"We applied the same approach in the state forest management, for example, through the Managing the Forest with the Community [PHBM] program," he said. He added that the approach was implemented following the worst span of illegal logging activity during the 1998-2001 period, which damaged some 180,000 hectares of state forests in the province.

A study showed that the illegal logging was done by people in pursuit of livelihoods. By directly involving the community in managing the forests, the benefits of which they can enjoy through a profit sharing mechanism, illegal logging activities could eventually be stopped, excepting those committed by professional syndicates. "Of the damaged forests, we currently only have some 10,000 hectares left that have yet to be rehabilitated," he said. Sri praised the active role of universities in the province for their help in making the forest expansion program a success. Semarang State University (Unnes), for example, has obliged each of its new students to plant trees. Thanks to the program, the university succeeded in conserving 80 percent of its previous 125 hectares of its critically-damaged forest area.

"Unnes has also prepared a 60-hectare conservation area named the Biodiversity Park. But so far, only 20 percent of this has been fully developed," university conservation team leader Margareta Wahyuni said.