

A nature lover's haven on Surabaya's east coast

Solitary labor: A man works alongside a fish pond in Wonorejo, Rungkut subdistrict, on Surabaya's eastern coast. Only a brief motorbike ride away from the center of Indonesia's second largest city sits lush mangrove forest set against the sea. Home to hundreds of hectares of mangrove and numerous species of birds, Wonorejo in Rungkut subdistrict lies inconspicuously on Surabaya's eastern coast.

The area also sustains many who earn their living by farming fish and shrimp in the saltwater ponds that cradle the edge of Surabaya. Tracing the river past homes flooded from recent rains and expansive advertisements for a high-end housing development in the area, a turn onto a dirt path reveals something extraordinary.

In some ways Wonorejo has managed to survive Surabaya's frenzied development. Swallows and terns swoop about, people quietly manage their fish farms, Mt. Arjuna looms dramatically to the south, and, now, there is a remarkable protected area — part of the largest urban mangrove forest in all of Java and Bali.

Wonorejo attracts nature enthusiasts who say the place is vital as a home for diverse bird life, as is the larger expanse of Surabaya's shores. Yuwana Peksa, a local birdwatcher and research coordinator at the Foundation for Nature Education and Conservation, has compiled data recording 137 species of birds along Surabaya's east coast, including more than 40 varieties of migrating birds that stop there to rest and feed.

Wildlife Conservation Society — Indonesia field coordinator Iwan Londo said, "The Wonorejo area is very important to protect for the continuing survival of migrant shore birds because they need a place that is safe and continues to have plenty of food available."

It is important to monitor the area in order to watch for any changes that might occur, he added.

As sandpipers plop about and cormorants fly dreamily overhead, one doesn't have to look far to see that the area's proximity to such a large city has its effects.

Estuaries of the Brantas River — Surabaya's largest — flow through Wonorejo and out to the Madura Strait.

Their waters bring with them Surabaya's garbage.

Plastic bags, dirty diapers, Styrofoam and the various refuse unthinkingly tossed into the river from a city of more than 2 million are trapped in the mud amidst mangrove roots.

"People came to the area to clean up the trash. After a few hours of work, they had collected more than 200 kilograms of garbage," local fish farmer Suratno said. Homeward bound: Fishermen return home from work at sea along the Wonokromo River. In addition, Yuwana said people had been felling the mangrove for wood because it makes good charcoal for ikan bakar (grilled fish).

Surabaya's government began efforts to preserve Wonorejo several years ago.

Now, signs line the road marking the way to a protected area and a tall gate welcomes visitors to an ecotourism project — the Ekowisata Mangrove.

Boats are available to travel a scenic route along the Wonokromo River toward its mouth, where passengers alight and follow raised bamboo footbridges past collections of clinging waste.

At the edge of the sea is the gazebo. It is an impressive open-air structure for anyone who wants to enjoy a singular vista: Lapping waters, evidence of government mangrove replanting and the gleaming Suramadu Bridge in the distance.

Yet, the preservation of Wonorejo is not so simple. While sitting beside the dock for the site's ecotourism activities, a sluice adjacent to a water basin was opened, releasing dark, foul smelling water into the river.

Eddy Soedjono, a professor at the 10 Nopember Institute of Technology, Surabaya, said the pumping station, built within the last 10 years, served the smaller rivers in the area. Water polluted with Surabaya's waste is retained in the basin until it is released into the river and out to the Madura Strait.

"The water is black because of the decomposition of organic material from waste water." The smell is a result of that decomposition, he added. Every year, Eddy brings students in his water resources conservation class to Wonorejo to observe firsthand the impact of pollution in a protected site. He said, "The mangrove area is a protected area for water too, is it not?"

When asked about the changes in the area in the past few years, Yuwana said the question was a complex one.

"It depends on what you're referring to. The environmental, the social, the economic, or something else."

Notwithstanding recent developments, Wonorejo's fish farmers labor on despite the pollution that affects their fish, floods during the rainy season and government indifference.

After heavy rains the night before, Suratno, who has lived in the area his whole life, said he returned to his fish farm concerned about flooding. He waded in knee-deep water and mud for over an hour. The local government has not paid much attention to their situation, he said. "We must look after ourselves."

Set next to Suratno's fish farm, far from Wonorejo's ecotourism outpost, is a new, unfinished structure for researchers and students. Except for the odd rumbling of motorboats carrying fisherman home from work, only the slitherings of mudskippers and the languid cries of birds can be heard from the open-air pavilion.



Open skies: The gazebo is an impressive open-air structure for anyone wanting to enjoy water views and see evidence of government mangrove replanting. Independent from government conservation efforts, this endeavor will foster another form of conservation in Wonorejo's tenuous environment. It is also fitting the construction is situated amid the labor of fish farmers — the real Wonorejo experts.

Iwan, who has been visiting Wonorejo since 1999, said it was fish farmers who let him know about any noteworthy bird sightings. "Every time I go there I always get information about migratory birds from the guards at the fish ponds."

One can only hope Wonorejo can continue to exist in such symbiosis with so many elements. The area certainly sustains many, whether it is sustenance of the practical kind for fish farmers and their families, or of the more fragile sort as a site for efforts at conservation. Yet, what endures is also the kind of sustenance that bestows tranquility in the quiet observation of the natural, luminous world, in the ability to witness herons and kingfishers searching for their own forms of sustenance.