

## Environment Watch: Trees planted on Merapi's scorched slopes

People living on the slopes of Mount Merapi have found their own way of speeding up rehabilitation work on swaths of forest and farmland devastated by the volcano's pyroclastic flows last October and November. In Cangkringan, Sleman, Yogyakarta, youths have asked tourists to donate tree seedlings so that locals can rehabilitate their damaged forests.

"They may enjoy visiting our ruined villages but we also require them to help us restore the areas to make them green and cool again," Burhan of Pangukrejo, Cangkringan, said Wednesday.

Tourists need not find their own seedlings. Volunteers sell seedlings along the Kuning River on the path to the lava tour site in Kinahrejo, the village of Merapi's late spiritual gatekeeper Mbah Maridjan, who was killed during the eruptions.

"We have prepared seedlings that are easy to grow like mahogany, jabon and various fruit tree seedlings," Wahyu Diyanto, one of the volunteers, said. Tourists wanting to donate plants are asked to pay Rp 5,000 per seedling. Fifty percent of the money is taken by the local youths to fund planting efforts, and the rest is spent on more seedlings.

"We have been running the movement for just a week. So far we have sold about 100 seedlings a day. They all have been planted in areas most likely to reforest," Wahyu said. A visitor, Samto of Srigading subdistrict, Sanden, Bantul, which lies about 60 kilometers to the south of Kinahrejo, welcomed the movement.

"There are thick layers of volcanic materials as far as the eye can see here. Unless reforestation is accomplished, volcanic mud flows and a water crisis will become routine disasters," Samto said, adding that he was visiting Kinahrejo for the third time.

Locals and tourists in the Kaliurang resort area in Pakem, Sleman, with support from the local administration, have planted trees on Pronojiwo hill. In Dukun district, Magelang, Central Java, villagers voluntarily planted 1,000 seedlings along the Tlising River in Babadan II. The project's coordinator, Heri Subrastawa, said the effort aimed to protect water resources around the river, which had for a long time supplied thousands of people in the region.

"The forests as well as the catchment areas have all been scorched. Unless there is replanting, the springs will all disappear," Heri said.

Villagers have also planted trees on damaged areas of their own land that cannot be cultivated or lived on.

Agriculture Minister Suswono launched a reforestation effort at the end of last year by planting banana trees on 25 hectares of land devastated by pyroclastic flows from Merapi. The recovery period is predicted to take a long time as not all of the damaged areas can be reforested because they are covered in thick volcanic ash or lava.

Reforestation therefore shall be carried out in steps, beginning with the areas where reforestation efforts are easiest.

The eruptions of October and November last year, which claimed nearly 400 lives and devastated 23 villages, also destroyed 4,400 hectares of forest of the original 6,400 hectares on the mountain's slopes. Millions of trees were burned to charcoal by pyroclastic flows whose temperatures ranged from 300 to 600 degrees Celsius.

