

Sumatra's forests in dire state due to deforestation

Three protected forests – Gunung Leuser National Park, Kerinci Seblat National Park and Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park – are reportedly in a chronic state of degradation due to rampant illegal logging, which has led to the loss of vital habitats in the nature preserves.

The three national parks make up the 2.5 million hectare Tropical Rainforest Heritage of Sumatra (TRHS) site.

The TRHS was listed as one of the world's natural heritage sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2005.

Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA) head Istanto said illegal logging on the TRHS site continued to expand, citing the involvement of three agency heads in Southeast Aceh regency in an illegal logging case in the Gunung Leuser National Park.

Istanto acknowledged that the authorities had taken action against the three officials but added that every time legal measures were taken against illegal logging suspects, the lives of people investigating such cases or of witnesses were put at risk.

“Frankly, we have not been able to eradicate illegal logging in the TRHS,” Istanto told The Jakarta Post in a workshop entitled “Improving Protection on Biodiversity and Orangutan Habitat in the Tropical Forests of Sumatra”.

More than 100 participants, including academics, representatives from NGOs and civil servants took part in the two-day workshop, which was organized by UNESCO in Medan, North Sumatra.

The participants urged the government to be more serious about combating the destruction in the three protected national parks.

Istanto said UNESCO may ultimately drop the TRHS from its list of world heritage sites if the area continued to suffer further degradation due to illegal logging.

To prevent that from happening, Istanto added, the preservation of and security in the TRHS had been placed under the control of the Office of the Coordinating Political, Legal and Security Affairs Minister and the National Police.

Meanwhile, the deputy director and senior program specialist for environmental science for UNESCO in Jakarta, Shahbaz Khan, said UNESCO supported the Indonesian government in its efforts to improve protection of the TRHS in line with international agreements. According to Khan, the TRHS had to be saved from further destruction and the eradication of wildlife habitats.