

Mt. Sinabung eruptions threaten endangered species

The Mount Sinabung eruptions in Karo regency have not only had an adverse impact on the local economy, but also on the rare wildlife surviving around the mountain as well as the traditional customs of the surrounding communities.

Among the rare animals that descended from the mountain was a clouded leopard, which was found dead in a chili farm in Kuta Gugung village, a 10-meter long python, which descended on Payung village, located within a 4-kilometer radius of the volcano and a Sumatran serow, which was found in Beras Tepu village in Simpang Empat district, North Sumatra Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA) reported.

Based on the data at the North Sumatra BKSDA in 1990, only 32 Sumatran serow were documented living in the wild both in the Bukit Barisan mountain range region and the Bukit Batabur protected forest in Riau.

According to North Sumatra BKSDA head Istanto, the rare species is believed to have descended from the Mt. Sinabung because of increased volcanic activity or due to a lack of food. Villagers said that the animal was still alive when it was found on Jan. 17, but was in a weakened condition. The villagers found the Sumatran serow sitting feebly behind a house next to a farm.

“We transported the animal to a safer location, but we failed to save it. It died on Friday. After conducting an autopsy, we found that 30 percent of its lungs had turned black. We assume that this was caused by inhaling volcanic ash,” said Istanto.

Meanwhile, the rare clouded leopard was still alive when found by residents, but died soon after. Antara news agency photographer Irsan Mulyadi who took the exclusive photos of the large cat in a chili farm said it was already dead when he photographed it.

“It was dead and covered in volcanic ash and already smelled like it had been dead for some time,” said Irsan.

The leopard has since been buried by the North Sumatra BKSDA. According to the Karo administration, the increased volcanic activities have raised the number of evacuees to over 9,000 families or 28,000 residents from dozens of villages. The evacuees have so far taken shelter at 42 evacuation points located within a radius of 10 km and 15 km from the foot of the volcano.

The ongoing disaster has already claimed 31 lives and destroyed several hectares of agricultural land in the regency, which is widely known as a vegetable and fruit producer. The Karo administration previously said that it would relocate residential settlements located in a dangerous zone within a 3-km radius of the volcano.

Karo community elder in Medan Ukok Sitepu expressed his grief after 12 of his relatives died in the disaster. Due to the volcanic activity surrounding villagers have not been able to carry out local customs as bereaved families were unable to carry out customary funeral procession in the villages.

Generally, a Batak Karo family needs between three to seven days for a traditional funeral procession before burial.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is scheduled to visit Mt. Sinabung evacuees on Thursday.