

# Guardians of the environment

People across the globe first strived to preserve the environment for their own survival. But civilization has transformed the human instinct of seeking harmony with nature into a social or even religious value that is passed on from one generation to the next.

Known as one of the world's largest greenhouse-gas emitters, Indonesia has spared no effort in controlling the damage, ranging from the enforcement of a law that criminalizes acts of environmental destruction, to rewards for those who help to protect nature.

To mark World Environment Day on Thursday, Vice President Boediono, on behalf of the government, presented the Kalpataru and Adipura awards to individuals, groups, corporations and local governments that contributed to environment conservation, either through their work or policies.

For the Teratak Air Hitam customary group in Sentajo Raya district, Kuantan Singingi regency, however, the impacts of an initiative to protect the ecosystem in Rimbo Larangan forest, covering 78.5 hectares, have far exceeded the government's incentives. Head of the regional forestry agency, Agus Mandar, says the customary group has salvaged water resources for people living in the regency.

The forest has long been under the supervision of four customary leaders who ban forest encroachment, let alone logging activities. Members of the customary group face punishment if found guilty of violating the customary rule, which in fact is unwritten but has been enforced for generations.

Teratak Air Hitam is the second customary group in Kuantan Singingi to have won the Kalpataru, after the community of Jake village, Kuantan Tengah, won it in 2008 for preserving a 400-hectare forest nearby.

Hundreds of individuals and groups have won the Kalpataru Award since its inception in 1981, but the reality is that environmental degradation continues unchecked. Deforestation has been rampant, pollution has worsened and a good quality of life, at least for the next generations, is at stake.

Researchers from 15 universities, led by the University of Maryland and assisted by Google and NASA, found in a study released in November last year that Indonesia lost 15.8 million hectares of forest area between 2000 and 2012, the fifth-largest amount in the world after Russia, Brazil, the United States and Canada. The massive deforestation happened despite the forest-clearance moratorium and log-export ban.

The Forestry Ministry doubts the forest-loss data, but it is difficult to deny that forest conversion for business purposes, such as plantations and mining, has intensified, as evident in the rise in the number of permits issued in the regions ever since regional autonomy was introduced in 2001. It seems Indonesia's commitment to environmental conservation contradicts the reality in the field. On one hand the government pushes for clean energy to reduce emissions, but on the other hand it is reluctant to cut the fuel subsidy.

But as the Kalpataru Award winners have demonstrated, it is community-based movements rather than government policies that really protect the environment.