

ASEAN biodiversity and climate change: SOS

Located strategically in the tropics with a total population of more than 600 million and a gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of 5.3 percent in 2013, a strong regional entity and forming the unique Indo-Malayan region ASEAN is not only geopolitically important but also to host one of the most diverse ecosystems comprising 20 percent of the world's terrestrial and marine biodiversity. ASEAN is also home to 25 million hectares of inimitable peatlands representing 60 percent of the world's total tropical peatlands, which play a pivotal role in supporting economic development, biodiversity conservation, carbon sinks, food security and livelihood.

However, these invaluable biodiversity and peatland resources have been subject to consistent loss over time. The key drivers of biodiversity loss in Southeast Asia include ecosystem and habitat change through uncontrolled development, rising temperatures and instant weather disruption caused by climate change, changes in species dynamics caused by invasive alien species, over-exploitation of natural resources and widespread poverty in some ASEAN member states.

Meanwhile, peatlands in ASEAN are declining rapidly through uncontrolled burning and mismanagement, responsible for 90 percent of transboundary haze and emitting 1.5-2.0 billion tons of CO₂ per year or equivalent to 6-7 percent of global fossil fuel emissions.

While carbon emissions contribute to climate change, there is ample evidence that climate change also affects biodiversity. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, climate change is likely to become one of the most significant drivers of biodiversity loss by the end of the century.

Climate change is already forcing biodiversity to adapt either by shifting habitat, changing life cycles or developing new physical traits.

The study on climate change vulnerability in Southeast Asian nations found that the whole of the Philippines, the Mekong River Delta in Vietnam, almost all the regions of Cambodia, North and East Laos, the Bangkok region of Thailand, West and South Sumatra and West and East Java in Indonesia are among the most vulnerable regions to climate change impact on the economy, environment (including biodiversity) and the social life of the population.

Those threats to biodiversity are rooted deep in the interactions of a number of factors. First, most of the ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHPs) are not well managed.

Illegal activities such as illegal logging, encroachment, wildlife poaching and trade, illegal road construction and illegal land clearing for agriculture and settlements have been frequently heard of inside ASEAN-protected areas.

Second, a closer look at the drivers of deforestation reveals that most of the threats to biodiversity conservation, such as infrastructure and agricultural expansion, mining, energy and other development activities, originate from outside the protected areas. Therefore, it is crucial to mainstream biodiversity conservation into development plans, as outlined in the Aichi Biodiversity Targets.

Third, on biodiversity database and research, there are urgent needs for (1) gathering basic ecological data; (2) making long-term studies to understand the effects of habitat loss on biotas and their resilience; (3) maintaining biotic sustainability in regenerating and degraded habitats; (4) assessing socioeconomic and climate-driven biodiversity loss; and (5) understanding and integrating indigenous conservation regimes and knowledge into conservation planning.

Fourth, in addition to the weak institutions responsible for biodiversity conservation and protected area management in most ASEAN member states, the regional institution established to look after biodiversity conservation, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), is still struggling to prove itself as a center of excellence in biodiversity conservation.

A lack of funding, experts and coordination are among three of the most acute issues. The Environment Division of the ASEAN Secretariat is also facing similar problems.

ASEAN, through different initiatives, policies and strategies, has initiated several important activities to protect rich biodiversity and peatland areas from further destruction.

Although ASEAN has had some successes in the past, biodiversity and peatland degradation remain a serious threat due to the inconsistency of some ASEAN member states in supporting biodiversity conservation and the complicated coordination issues at the regional level.

Although the establishment of ACB was supported by all ASEAN member states, until now Indonesia and Cambodia have not ratified its establishment. Not all countries that have ratified the ACB establishment are contributing to support the ACB's operation and the biodiversity trust fund to support future biodiversity conservation.

The Environmental Division of the ASEAN Secretariat tasked to support efficient coordination among ASEAN member states has not been able to move the process ahead smoothly. On the climate change issue, ASEAN is also not very united. Singapore has expressed its view more often individually or through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), stressing the urgency of the rising sea level. Brunei Darussalam has not joined any group.

Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar belong to the Least Developed Countries' group within the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change's Conference of the Parties (UNFCCC's COP). ASEAN middle-income developing countries have also split along less formal alliances, proving the split of interest between members.

Some observers have long seen the ASEAN way of solving problems as another form of the ASEAN paradox. This slow or motionless attitude in dealing with complicated issues should not be tolerated when dealing with the serious threats to biodiversity, either from climate change or other driving forces. ASEAN institutions need to move faster and more harmoniously, for example, in dealing with peatland fires in Indonesia.

ASEAN's leadership role is needed to support Indonesia in dealing with this issue by using high level diplomacy instead of leaving this sensitive issue to be dealt with by Singapore and Indonesia only, which has proven to be ineffective.

The future of ASEAN biodiversity and climate change depends on how ASEAN's formal and semiformal structures like the ASEAN Secretariat, universities, research institutions and NGOs are able to work together.

While ASEAN's non-intervention policy should be respected, it should not hamper the formal and informal efforts to deal with biodiversity loss and haze, which have serious economic, health and conservation implications.

ASEAN countries differ in their state of development and democracy and consequently in the way they address biodiversity conservation and climate change issues. Some poorer members need special attention.

Here lies the challenge to creating a more prudent cooperation system that will benefit all parties. Collaboration with a similar institution such as the EU has proven to be effective and mutually beneficial. While the EU fulfills its global biodiversity commitment, ASEAN could benefit from its funding and technology.

Finally, while strategic cooperation is important, ASEAN should be more independent in the future.

ASEAN structures responsible for biodiversity and climate change issues under the ASEAN Secretariat and other related ASEAN bodies and structures should be encouraged to undertake more responsibilities to solve common problems.

Jamal M.Gawi, Jakarta, The writer is a biodiversity conservation and governance specialist, who has a PhD in environmental studies from the University of Indonesia.