

Coastal birds go urban

One lunchtime in Medan, Marjoko from the North Sumatra chapter of the Indonesian Environment Forum pointed to a flock of coastal birds now becoming “urban birds” on the city’s outskirts, Deli Serdang regency. “They shouldn’t be here. They’ve flown here only to find something to eat. Their mangrove habitat has been destroyed,” he said with deep concern.

Mangrove forests in Indonesia constitute 75 percent of Southeast Asia’s mangrove area, or 27 percent of that of the world’s. Indonesian mangroves, according to Marjoko, have the highest diversity in the world.

Mostly covering the coastal regions of Sumatra, Kalimantan and Papua, Indonesia has around 9.36 million hectares (ha) of mangrove forests, but 48% is categorized as “moderately damaged” and 23% as “badly damaged”.

In North Sumatra, one of the provinces with the largest mangrove areas, 77 percent are reported to be severely damaged, and 13 percent moderately damaged, leaving only a paltry 36,000 ha (10 percent) in good condition.

The decline shows a real degradation of mangrove forests, progressing annually at the rate of around 200,000 ha, due to conversion into fish ponds and oil palm estates, the charcoal industry and illegal logging. Weak law enforcement and graft has strengthened corporate control over mangrove swamps, resulting in environmental damage and the destruction of coastal communities.

The forests are shrinking in the eastern coastal region of Sumatra too, destroying potential resources and the diversity of mangrove forest vegetation, while obliterating the environmental protection aspects of the mangroves.

To restore the mangrove forests, the damage needs to be clearly measured. Local communities must join in conservation efforts. Mangrove land is vital in lessening global warming and climate change.

Indonesia ratified the international Convention on Wetlands by presidential decree in 1991, but conservation of mangrove forests hasn’t been properly implemented and their destruction through estate and pond expansion hasn’t been stopped or even slowed by law enforcement.

The law on environment protection and management was also introduced in 2009, including its enforcement. The 1999 Forestry Law prohibits tree felling within a certain distance from the shore. Today, mangrove wildlife reserve zones where some migratory birds stop over are also considerably damaged.

“Mangrove forest degradation on the eastern coast of North Sumatra is so serious and the rate of deforestation is so alarming that the habitat for wild birds is now gone. Such coastal birds as great-billed herons, purple herons, pied herons, striated herons, gray-crowned night herons, Malay herons, white-tailed kingfishers and little egrets are forced to move to safer urban areas to survive,” Marjoko raged.

The Cemara Asri luxury housing complex on the fringes of Medan is an area that could become an alternative habitat for wild birds. The management has reserved a plot of 5 ha as a reserve for wild birds. The land, worth billions of rupiah, is now a luxury home for birds from the coast of Langkat and Deli Serdang.

“There’re at least 5,000 birds of many different species now in the new habitat at Cemara Asri. This location is also a tourist and student destination, with facilities for monitoring and research. This kind of thing should happen in every new development,” he said.

Istanto, head of the North Sumatra Natural Resources Conservation Center (BKSDA), admitted the loss of 30 percent of mangroves in Langkat, even in Karang Gading wildlife reserve, to oil palm estates and ponds. Istanto has promised to overcome the issue by arresting those involved, but so far nothing has been done.

The partial solution to some of the forest damage is replanting in ravaged areas, which according to Istanto has been carried out since 2010, with one million mangrove trees already planted. A model conservation village has been initiated in Tanjung Ibas, by providing seedlings and cattle. The community is now cooperating with local rangers for joint patrols in the wildlife reserve and mangroves.

Protected forest and conservation zone utilization coordinator of the provincial BKSDA, Ida Marni, said the destruction of mangroves had caused local people, particularly farmers, to lose their source of livelihood, besides the source of food for coastal birds.

“Oil palms pose a major threat. Similarly, coastal bird habitat has been occupied by men. Everybody should work together and share the vision of safeguarding nature — the source of income of coastal farmers and fishermen — against harm,” she added.

Fauzan, of the Mangrove Forest Management Center (BPHM) said his office had been training regional and national conservation groups while managing mangrove areas as resources for ecotourism, such as those in Hamlet II, Sei Nagalawan village, Deli Serdang.

Meanwhile, Conservation Mentality (Come), set up in 2008, has been drilling conservation ideas into students and the communities who face the impact of the destruction.

“Beginning with students, we are trying to teach people in Pakpak Bharat regency, which is a conservation zone, to respect and preserve nature, because it is for their own good. 85 percent of the area is forestland,” said Jenny RL Berutu, director of Come.

In North Sumatra, Come is replanting mangroves in Pantai Gading village, Sicanggang district, and Tanjung Ibas village.