



Wehea Protected Forest: How the Wehea People Protect and Secure Rights to Natural Resources in the Changing Climate



Two Petkuq Mehuey members patrolling Wehea Protected Forest. Photo©Nick Hall

The Wehea people are the first and oldest indigenous tribe to inhabit the Wahau Watershed of East Kutai District, East Kalimantan Province. They once controlled large expanses of the forest. Now, 94,000 acres of forest remain in Wehea. This forest is home to endangered species, such as the Bornean orangutan, Sunda clouded leopard, and Miller's Grizzled Langur. Studies conducted by The Nature Conservancy, in cooperation with the District of East Kutai, found over 9 species of primates, 12 species of rodents, 19 species of mammals, 114 species of birds, and 59 species of commercially valuable trees in the forest. It also provides herbs, fruits, clean water, and other materials for customary ceremonies for Wehea people.

Over time, much of the forest was converted and degraded as the development of logging concessions, settlements, and agro-industries took place. For years, the forest was managed by a private company as a logging concession, which limited the community's access to the forest. In

2004, the company stopped its operations. The Wehea people seized this opportunity and proposed to become guardians of their forest.

The government approved this proposal, and in November 2004, the Wehea Customary Council declared the forest as *Keldung Laas Wehea Long Skung-Mlenyie* or Wehea Protected Forest. This is a major breakthrough. The status of Wehea Forest then was still a state forest but the Council and Wehea people had control over its management. For example, the Council reinstated customary forest protection laws and established a community forest patrol team called "Petkuq Mehuey." By 2007, these efforts eliminated wildlife poaching and illegal logging. Second, to deal with the challenges of sustainable financing for long-term management, the Council developed multiple funding sources, such as ecotourism, a community tree nursery that sells seedlings to surrounding companies that are restoring forests, and an agreement with a nearby

oil palm company. The Council's initiative improved the community's well-being. It created jobs for the 40-person forest patrol team and around 30 people that run the tree nursery. Ecotourism has become an important source of income, attracting 190 visitors in 2014. Last year, a total of USD 17,000 was generated from ecotourism and the sale of tree seedlings. From 2007 to 2014, 25 students received university scholarships, 50 students underwent computer training, and 250 people per year visited the village library. The Council is now working to obtain full rights over Wehea Forest which would change its status from state forest into customary forest.

The protection of the 94,000-acre Wehea Forest helps to address climate change by contributing to reducing Indonesia's high rate of emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. The forest patrol team has stopped illegal logging in the Wehea Forest: the rate of illegal logging dropped from 568 acres per year in 2002-2003 to zero in 2006-2007, and this zero illegal logging has been maintained. In addition, Wehea Protected Forest reduces vulnerability of communities and wildlife to the impacts of climate change. As the surrounding areas have been converted into plantations, Wehea Forest helps maintain a favorable micro-climate. It also protects the headwaters of the Skung and Mlenyie rivers, both of which provide clean water for surrounding communities. Wehea Protected Forest is now serving as a model for other communities—and companies—to protect and sustain their forests, thereby further contributing to reducing deforestation and climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions.



East Kalimantan orangutan. Photo©Donald Bason/TNC.

Wehea Forest is also an important site for orangutan conservation. The population of orangutans in Wehea Forest is estimated to be around 750 individuals. The commitment of Wehea people to protecting orangutan habitat has even inspired surrounding companies. In April 2015, 5 private companies (1 palm oil, 1 forest plantation, and 3 logging concessions), district and provincial governments, The Nature Conservancy, and the Customary Council of Wehea signed a Memorandum of Understanding to protect over 650,000 acres of orangutan habitat. This is the first public-private-community partnership in Indonesia to protect a large area of orangutan habitat. Through this initiative, the companies will also receive technical support from The Nature Conservancy to improve their sustainable natural resource management practices.

The confidence and pride of the Wehea people has increased because of the recognition of the important role they play in protecting their forest. The Wehea people received a prestigious Kalpataru Award from the Indonesia Government in 2009. The Customary Head Ledjie Taq received a Satya Lencana medal from President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in the same year. Wehea is also a finalist for the 2015 Equator Prize.



Local women weaving rattan baskets for their own use and for sale. Photo©Nick Hall.

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