

Press release

-for immediate release-

South-east Asia's Peat Fires and Global Warming

**By Ecological Internet and Biofuelwatch
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Hundreds of peat and forest fires are once again burning across Indonesian Borneo and Sumatra, releasing vast quantities of greenhouse gases and destroying the livelihoods of local communities and habitats of countless species. Those annual fires release as much carbon as 15% of all emissions from burning fossil fuels worldwide. This year's fire season, however, threatens to be one of the worst ever: Haze is spreading across most of south-east Asia, schools are closed, and the largest surviving orang-utan population is threatened with extinction. A south-east Asian emergency meeting has just ended without agreement, and with Indonesia's neighbours threatening financial sanctions.

So far some 2,500 people from 75 countries have written to the UK, US and other governments from http://www.climateark.org/alerts/send.asp?id=indonesia_peatland to demand urgent international action at the forthcoming UN Climate Change Conference in Nairobi. The ongoing campaign is organized by Ecological Internet and supported by the British campaign group Biofuelwatch. It calls for urgent measures to stop the conversion of peat forests into timber and oil palm plantations, or agriculture, and to restore the peatlands which have already been drained and degraded.

Almuth Ernsting, a co-founder of Biofuelwatch, states: "The destruction of south-east Asia's peat forests is a major threat to the global climate, as well as to local people in Indonesia and Malaysia, and to global biodiversity. This is not simply somebody else's problem to solve: Across south-east Asia, millions of hectares of land are being converted to timber and oil palm plantations, and the UK is a major importer of timber products and palm oil from this region. Ironically, Britain, as part of the EU, is trying to meet some of its commitments under the Kyoto Protocol through the use of biodiesel, and much of this is made from palm oil. Far from reducing climate change emissions, we are subsidizing the destruction of one of the Earth's most important carbon sinks. We are therefore calling on UK citizens to support the Ecological Internet appeal."

Scientists estimate that the 1997 peat and forest fires emitted up to 2.5 billion tonnes of carbon and that the average is around 1 billion tonnes a year. By comparison, the Kyoto Protocol aims to reduce emissions from all Annex 1 countries by only 188 million tonnes a year from 1990 levels. Once the peat has been drained, all the carbon will enter the atmosphere – fires just speed up the process. This fire season could be one of the worst ever, as El Nino climate conditions bring drought to Indonesia.

Indonesia alone is planning to convert another 6.5 million hectares of land to oil palms, causing yet more CO₂ emissions. Much of the oil palms will be grown to make biodiesel which has been previously claimed to be carbon neutral: this is obviously not the case when it is associated with destruction of rainforest. Plantation owners routinely set fires to burn land, and they also evict local communities and force them into delicate ecological areas, including peat swamps. The Kyoto Protocol allows the funding of monoculture plantations, which can be extremely destructive to the environment and to communities, but it does not allow carbon credits to be used to protect virgin forests. This means that some of the money which is supposed to be spent on 'clean development' is given to timber and palm oil companies, even though both sectors are linked to vast climate change emissions.

Full details of the action alert can be found on www.climateark.org and http://www.climateark.org/alerts/send.asp?id=indonesia_peatland

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Notes:

1. Ecological Internet (EI) provides the most successful Internet based environment portals, search engines and international Earth advocacy network ever, regularly achieving environmental conservation victories around the world. EI specializes in the use of the Internet to achieve environmental conservation outcomes. Ecological Internet's mission is to empower the global movement for environmental sustainability by providing information retrieval tools, portal services and analysis that aid in the conservation of climate, forest, water and ocean ecosystems; and to commence the age of ecological sustainability and restoration. On average over 30,000 people a day visit our environmental portals.

2. Biofuelwatch is a UK campaign which seeks regulation to ensure that only sustainably-sourced biofuels can be sold in Britain in the European Union. For more details, see www.biofuelwatch.org.uk

3. For a fully referenced background paper about the peat and forest fires in south-east Asia, and their contribution to global warming, see <http://www.biofuelwatch.org.uk/peatfiresbackground.pdf>