



Sahabat Alam Malaysia
Friends of the Earth Malaysia
For Environmental Justice

1, Jalan Joki, 11400 Penang, Malaysia
Tel No: +604 827 6930
Fax No: +604 827 6932
Email: foemalaysia@gmail.com
<https://www.foe-malaysia.org>

Press Statement

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Stop Peatland Destruction

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) calls on the Sarawak government to stop further development on peatlands in the State. Among the ongoing development is BLD Plantation Berhad's concession in North of Sibu. Satellite image analysis performed by Friends of the Orangutans (FOTO) showed that between June and September 2015 BLD had cleared an average of 11 hectares daily.

Large-scale development and cultivation on peatlands continue to damage tropical peat swamp forest resources and natural functions. Sarawak had about 1.6 million hectares of peatlands. By the early 2000s, the State had already lost about 100,000 hectares of peatlands to oil palm plantations.

According to research institute Deltares, less than 16 percent of Sarawak's natural peat forests remain. From 2000 to 2014, the cover of industrial oil palm plantations increased from 6 percent to 47 percent, while the area of peat swamp forest decreased from 56 percent to less than 16 percent. The remaining area is also mostly drained.

Besides being rich in biodiversity, tropical peatlands play important roles regionally and locally in the water cycle, climate and landscape stabilisation. Tropical peat soils have high water tables that normally keep organic materials from fully decomposing, and as a result these soils sequester large amounts of carbon. Peatlands act as giant sponges, soaking up water and helping to mitigate flooding. During the dry season, peat releases water slowly, hence becoming a source of fresh water supply.

Forest fires in peatlands are also increasing in frequency and intensity, with disastrous consequences for biodiversity and the world's climate whereby burning organic matter releases large amounts of stored carbon into the atmosphere.

Despite the important functions, deforestation of peatland for conversion to agriculture and timber plantations still continues and these involve intensive drainage. Upon degradation, the vegetation and underlying peat which constitute a large and highly concentrated carbon pool will release greenhouse gases. As such, the peatlands which were net carbon sinks are now net carbon sources.

The signs of a warming planet are all around us. Thus we need to reduce drastically all human-caused emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. The government must commit to zero deforestation and maintain all our natural forests. Hence we urge the government of Sarawak and Malaysia to stop approving conversion of peatlands.

Keep the Carbon in the Ground.

S. M. Mohamed Idris
President
Sahabat Alam Malaysia