

Wildlife, food security and poverty

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Indonesia is second after Brazil in terms of ecosystem diversity among 12 “mega-diversity” countries, but is also highlighted as one of seven mega-diversity countries with a disturbing number of threatened species. Wildlife is a critically important resource for meeting the food and livelihood requirements of human communities in many biodiversity-rich regions of the world.

The utilization of wildlife is mostly driven by the value of wildlife itself, but in terms of wildlife conservation, the pattern of utilization is mostly focused on hunting for nutrition and trade.

People living in or near tropical forests have been hunting for at least 40,000 years in Africa and Southeast Asia, and at least 10,000 years in Latin America. This remains standard practice among many people living in the tropics today. Forest dwelling communities depend on meat from wildlife for both food and income. Wild meat contributes significantly to rural communities in Asia, Africa and Latin America, where it is often the sole available source of dietary protein. According to Prescott-Allen (1982), people in 62 countries still rely on wild animal meat as a primary source of protein.

The motivation to hunt or trade wildlife depends on both nutritional and economic factors. In addition, opportunities for free food and alternative income also encourage people to hunt. In Papua, for example, geographic barriers complicate government sponsored livestock distribution programs, whereas copious wildlife resources in the forest are cheaper more accessible for local people.

Consumption of wild meat has strong roots in indigenous forest dwelling communities, as proven by a multitude of different studies conducted around the world. Comprehensive information is less available in Indonesia, although papers on hunting practices in Kalimantan and Sulawesi have been published.

The indigenous population (Merap, Punan and Kenyah) in Malinau of East Kalimantan province still rely on wild products for their subsistence needs, particularly animal protein. In North Sulawesi, the hunting and wildlife trade patterns of the Minahasa people have significantly impacted the regional ecosystem.

There are indications that most hunting activities there are no longer sustainable, and increased demand for wild meat has had dramatic effects on efforts to restore local wildlife. A similar situation confronts the Wana people of upland Central Sulawesi, who are still heavily reliant on animal protein and fat secured from hunting and trapping.

Hunting wild animals has always been and continues to be an important aspect of life in rural Papuan communities. Even in modern times, some ethnic groups in Papua depend almost entirely on traditional hunting and gathering practices.

Does hunting contribute to mitigating rural poverty? In Oryx Forum Vol. 36 No. 4 (2002), Robinson and Bennet pointed out that traditional hunters in forest sites in Asia, Africa and Latin America earn less than US\$1 per day. Still, hunting in Asia and Africa remains an essential means of supplemental income for the poorest rural households.

Poverty encompasses more than a lack of money. It is inability to provide for basic needs. People in rural areas often lack education, skills, capital and market access. They have no options for alternative livelihoods or sources of food. They are forced to hunt and trade wildlife as a source of income.

Non-traditional economic demands have led to alarming levels of unrestrained hunting in tropical forests. As a consequence, numerous species are facing extinction. The loss of species has consequences for rural communities. For some people, the loss of wildlife presents a real threat to food security and alternative income.

Poverty alleviation is a primary developmental goal focusing on improving livelihoods and solving problems of food insecurity. Sustainable interaction between people and nature is important to fighting poverty. We need a better understanding of the links between environmental sustainability and the utilization of wildlife for alleviating extreme poverty.

It would be naive to expect that sustainable use of wildlife alone can constitute a realistic means of eliminating food insecurity. We need to carefully evaluate the issue of declining supplies of wild meat and the impact this has on food security. In this context, it is critical to understand rural versus urban patterns of wildlife utilization and disentangle the ultimate causes of overexploitation.

Overexploitation of wildlife can be difficult to control. What we can do is improve law enforcement and build monitoring capacity. Sustainable use of biodiversity will directly affect the utilization of natural resource by, for example, suppressing illegal hunting and the trade of wild animals.

There are two fundamental questions to consider in exploring the potential for collaboration between conservation and development: (1) are conservation goals compatible with the goals of the development sector? and (2) if there is common ground, then how can the two sectors work together effectively?

Food security and poverty alleviation are two issues that should be explored simultaneously.

Mismanagement will threaten biodiversity and indigenous populations in the future.

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