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Logging in Malaysia's Ulu Muda forest threatens wildlife and water supplies

26 June 2017 / **Kate Mayberry**

Activists have been alarmed to see old logging roads reopened and new logging tracks created in one of peninsular Malaysia's last wildernesses.

<https://news.mongabay.com/2017/06/logging-in-malysias-ulu-muda-forest-threatens-wildlife-and-water-supplies>

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- The Ulu Muda forest is the primary source of water for four million Malaysians, as well as for industry and agriculture.
- The forest is also home to a huge diversity of species, including the Asian elephant, Malayan tapir, sambar deer and clouded and spotted leopards.
- Although the federal government imposed a ban on logging in the reserve in 2003, local authorities have allowed commercial logging to increase over the past decade.

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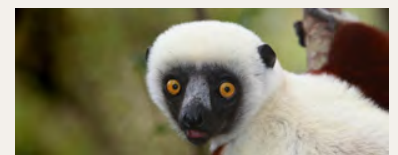
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Logs on the back of a truck leaving Ulu Muda. Photo by Kate Mayberry for Mongabay.

ULU MUDA, Malaysia — On a dusty roadside in northwestern Malaysia, the drivers of three trucks laden with logs are lounging beneath an open-sided hut while they wait for officials to clear their cargo. Moments later another lorry pulls over, its load balanced precariously on top of the trailer and a red flag fluttering at the rear to warn other road users about the potentially dangerous cargo.

Loggers are back in business in Ulu Muda, a protected forest that covers an area twice the size of Singapore along Malaysia's border with Thailand, and is the main source of water to some four million people in the country's three northern states.

"The extraction process is extremely destructive," said Phang Fatt Khow, the secretary of the Kedah branch of the Malaysian Nature Society and a former agricultural official. "They use a lot of bulldozers and they have to use a lot of timber trucks. That's even worse than the tree removal itself. The area shouldn't be logged at all."

Hymeir Kamarudin, who first visited Ulu Muda more than two decades ago, knows all about the damage caused by logging. The avid caver and limestone expert used to work for WWF-Malaysia in the neighboring state of Perlis, and now operates Ulu Muda Field Research Center, a 90-minute journey across the Muda Lake and up the Muda River into a rainforest thought to be as many as 170 million years old.



Crossing Ulu Muda lake. Photo by Kate Mayberry for Mongabay.

Over the years, he's seen how the expanding industry has turned the water a milky brown as rain washes the soil from the logged hillsides into the river. The sedimentation means that where once it was possible to make the journey to the camp on a boat with a regular outboard engine, only those with a long-tail motor can do so today. During the dry season, parts of the river are so shallow that visitors have to get out and maneuver the boat over the sand banks.

"Most of (the logging) is being legally done," Hymeir said. "But although it's legal it doesn't mean it's a good thing. The decision-makers in Kedah (the state where Ulu Muda is located) are not looking at the bigger picture: the conservation value of this place and the water catchment."

The north-western states are Malaysia's rice bowl. From Kedah's state capital of Alor Setar, tens of thousands of hectares of emerald green paddy fields stretch out across the coastal plains towards the hills, producing 40 percent of the rice grown in Malaysia each year. Successful rice cultivation generally demands plenty of water so in 1966 work began on an irrigation system that would ensure the rice farmers had enough to support not only one harvest a year, but two. With the support of the World Bank, the Pedu and Muda dams were built and the once forested valleys flooded. A further dam – Ahning – was completed in the 1980s.

Although the construction provided opportunities for logging in the forest, it was mostly left alone. But over the past two decades, commercial logging has expanded despite a Federal government ban that was imposed in the reserve in 2003 after a proposal to start helicopter logging triggered public anger.



Ulu Muda is located near Peninsular Malaysia's border with Thailand. Data from forest monitoring platform Global Forest Watch shows the extent of forest loss in the area from 2000-2013.

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The politics of logging

Politicians from rival parties have backed logging, which started in earnest after PAS, the Islamic party, took control of the state government in the 2008 elections. PAS officials claimed it was the only way the state could raise funds, but even when a new party took power in 2013, the practice continued. Politicians said they needed to honor the licenses that had already been given out.

Last December, environmentalists noticed an old logging road, not far from the Muda Dam and clearly visible from the lake, had been reopened raising concern not only about the effect on water quality so close to the lake's shore, but also potential access for poachers and hunters.



Satellite imagery shows the progression of a road south of Muda Lake in since 2016.



Data from Global Forest Watch indicates that the logging road (marked with red arrows) intrudes on previously intact forest landscapes.



The logging track can be seen from Muda Lake. Photo by Kate Mayberry for Mongabay.

Earlier this year, a local newspaper discovered new tracks in the southern part of Ulu Muda with high-quality wood – Meranti, Merbau and Cengal – piled up in camps ready to be transported to the timber mills. At one site, they found a signboard that indicated the state itself was the license owner.

Despite rising anger from NGOs and the state of Penang, which accused Kedah of “gambling” with the water supply by continuing to log, local authorities insist there has been no effect on water quality. Chief minister Ahmad Bashah Md Hanipah, who has responsibility for logging and land issues, declined Mongabay’s request for an interview.

“It’s a human problem,” said Zakaria Kamantasha, a former Army captain who comes from a family of paddy farmers and runs Sri Lovely, an organic rice farm about half an hour’s drive from the Muda Dam. “It’s humans who create nature’s problems.”

Sri Lovely’s rice paddies are spread out over a ten-hectare site in a valley of forested hills, surrounded by thatched huts of bamboo; home to the volunteers who spend their days tending the crop alongside workers from the surrounding villages. Water comes from the stream that runs through the site, although adaptations to traditional techniques mean they need about 60 percent less than other farmers.



The stream near Sri Lovely. Photo by Kate Mayberry.

Two months ago, floods triggered by heavy rain washed mud and sand downstream, swamping Sri Lovely’s rice fields and destroying the crop. The villagers further down the valley, who rely on the river for their daily needs, complain that their water is no longer as clean as it once was.

"You can see the sand in the river and after it rains the water's the color of 'Milo' (a chocolate milk drink)," Zakaria said, the farm's free range chickens pecking at the soil as he spoke. "I don't know why they don't care for the people in this area. They are just looking at the short term and not about the future. This land we borrow from our grandchildren. We must take care of it."

"Reserved for logging?"

Ulu Muda is a combination of lowland dipterocarp, hill dipterocarp and upper hill dipterocarp that includes virgin jungle as well as previously logged areas (secondary forest), and is divided into seven "Permanent Reserved Forests," which come under the country's forestry laws. Designation as a PRF does not mean the jungle will be preserved untouched. The majority of the PRF in the area is earmarked for timber production with slightly below a third for water catchment and the rest for research, education and recreation, according to a WWF-Malaysia report assessing the Ulu Muda water catchment in 2009.

"The area is classified as a forest reserve, but the protection is not strong enough," said MNS' Phang. "Reserved for what?" he asks. "Reserved for logging?"

Legal logging at Ulu Muda takes place under the Malaysian Timber Certification System (MTCS), which is supposed to protect the ecology of the country's forests and ensure the timber business is sustainable. Much of Malaysia's timber is exported overseas to countries including the UK, Switzerland and France, where such sustainability certification is crucial.



Satellite images from Planet Labs show a proliferation of logging tracks in the south of the reserve.



Close-up of the areas where logging spindles can be observed, indicating the tracks extend into previously intact forest landscapes.

At the beginning of this year, the Netherlands also recognized Malaysia's timber certification for use in public procurement projects. But Eric Wakker, director of Dutch NGO Aidenvironment, harbors serious doubts the industry's sustainability.

Examining audit reports, maps and satellite imagery for a report ([pdf](#)) on Kedah forestry last year he found logging in the state was "highly dependent" on primary forest, that there had been "recent, heavy logging" in water catchment forests, as well as land clearing and logging at elevations above 1,000 meters.

"The evidence is overwhelming that they are logging it," Wakker said. "There's nothing sustainable about it. It's outrageous that Western governments have endorsed this practice of 'sustainability.'" Wakker plans to take his campaign back to the Dutch parliament. "(The issue) is not closed," he insisted.



Ulu Muda forest. Photo by Kate Mayberry for Mongabay.

A haven for mammals and birds

Ulu Muda was first proposed as a wildlife reserve in 1968, by an ecologist named W.E. Stevens, and the suggestion was included in the Third Malaysia Plan (Malaysia's government uses these plans to map out its development strategy) of 1976 – 1980. Recognition of Ulu Muda's conservation value also came in the National Physical Plan, which designated the region as an Environmentally Sensitive Area Rank 1, and noted its importance to the Central Forest Spine, the jungles including the main national park that run from north to south along the country's main mountain range.

The area is home to a huge diversity of species from the Asian elephant to the Malayan tapir and birdlife such as the globally-threatened plain-pouched hornbill, which takes to the skies in formation at dusk. In July last year, volunteers counted an astonishing 1,720 birds in a single evening. Along with neighboring Belum-Temenggor, it is one of the only places in Malaysia where all ten species of hornbills can be found.



The team spent 18 months in the area until June 2016, setting up camera traps around the forest to monitor animal movements. Within the 120-square-kilometer camera grid they created, they detected 54 species, including 37 mammals, 16 of which were Near Threatened, Vulnerable, Endangered and Critically Endangered, according to the IUCN's Red List.

While the clouded leopard was the main subject of the team's work, they were surprised to capture photographs of the spotted leopard, which had previously only been recorded in Endau-Rompin, a state park in the southern part of the peninsula. In an April letter to the Kedah State Government, as concerns about logging mounted, the team's director, Professor David Macdonald, described Ulu Muda as a "vital habitat for sustaining many important species from charismatic carnivores to iconic herbivores."



Camera-trap image of a clouded leopard, courtesy of WildCRU.



Camera-trap images of a spotted leopard, courtesy of WildCRU.

But the team's research also revealed "multiple signs" of illegal poaching and harvesting. Despite chaining and locking the cameras to the trees, WildCRU lost about 50 during the course of their research and came across poachers armed with guns, some of whom were also caught on camera.

"The problem with logging is that it creates access," Hymeir explained. "When you have roads people can start coming in and that's when you get problems; poaching, hunting, people who want to set up orchards..."

In 2014, WWF-Malaysia warned that logging could "degrade or even destroy" Ulu Muda's salt licks with logging roads opening up the forest and increasing the risk of poaching ([pdf](#)). It recommended the deposits – along with a two-kilometer buffer zone – be designated High Conservation Value Forest. It also concluded that Ulu Muda's natural forest should be retained and made a state or national park with all logging activities prohibited.

Less than half of Peninsular Malaysia's total land area remains forested, and only a small portion of that is classified as unlogged, primary forest. Ulu Muda, then, is one of the country's last wildernesses, a critical source of water for millions of people and an environment where wildlife thrives. After so many years, campaigners say it's time for Malaysia to make good on proposals first mooted nearly half a century ago and declare Ulu Muda a state park.

"It's time for us to change our mindset," said Wong Ee Phin, who is a researcher in the Management and Ecology of Malaysian Elephants team at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. "We do not need to depend on the exploitation of natural resources anymore. We need to recognize that what we have is very special."



WildCRU camera traps caught evidence of armed poachers and hunters in Ulu Muda, even during daylight hours. Image courtesy of WildCRU.

Citations:

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