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Borneo Forest Faces Extinction

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By Niall McKay [Niall McKay](#)   Also by this reporter

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Illegal logging is destroying the equatorial rain forests of Indonesian Borneo, bringing the island, once known as the lungs of Asia, to the brink of an ecological disaster.

Not only has 95 percent of the forest legally set aside for logging been cleared but nearly 60 percent of protected national parkland has been illegally logged, according to a new report in this week's *Science* by professor [Lisa M. Curran](#) of the [Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies](#).

The illegal timber is turned into plywood and is exported to other parts of Asia. It is also used to build furniture for Japanese, European and U.S. markets. The island of Kalimantan's valuable old growth, called meranti (Philippine mahogany), is used for hardwood flooring and provides wood trim for luxury automobiles.

If the current rate of destruction continues, the report says, Kalimantan, which is about the size of Texas, will be completely stripped of its rain forests in the next three years. This will have a drastic effect on the wildlife, the native population and the local weather patterns. Animals such as Malaysian sun bears, hornbills, bearded pigs and orangutans are rapidly becoming endangered species, according to the report.

The report combined aerial and satellite photographs with data from geographical mapping systems and remote sensing devices. It was carried out between 1999 and September 2003.

"Already, what is left (of the forest) is too small and too fragmented to support many of the species that depend on the forest," said Curran, director of the Tropical Resources Institute at Yale University. "For the first time we have seen large mammals, such as orangutans and Malaysian sun bears, wild boar, starving."

There are more than 420 different birds and 222 mammal species in Kalimantan, half of which depend on the rain forests for survival. Furthermore, the indigenous people of Borneo, the Dyaks, depend on boar as a primary source of protein.

"Clearly the animals are in crisis," said Curran. "In Gunung Palung National Park in

West Kalimantan, for example, the orangutan population will drop by a third in the next couple of years."

Curran said she believes that at the current rate of decline, many of the rain-forest animals will become extinct in less than 10 years. "We won't see extinctions until we reach some sort of threshold," she said. "We are very close to that threshold now and once we reach it will be too late to stop."

The rapid growth of oil palm plantations, which have undergone a 40-fold increase since 1992, is further exacerbating the problem because large areas of the rain forest have been clear-cut to make way for the crop, and the plantations serve as barriers to migrating animal populations.

Kalimantan's rain forests' growth cycles interact with the El Niño weather system. Forest fragmentation has transformed El Niño from a regenerative force into a destructive one. As the forest is cleared, droughts become more frequent and severe, giving rise to more frequent wild fires.

Borneo is the first land mass the [El Niño-Southern Oscillation](#) weather system hits. And the El Niño wildfires in Borneo and Brazil in 1997 and 1998 created more carbon dioxide emissions than the whole of Western Europe's industrial output, according to Curran.

There are many explanations offered for the destruction of the rain forest, including a lack of oversight from a decentralized government and opportunism by locals.

But Curran said she believes that the real causes of the destruction of the forest are international demand for the timber, a massive industry suffering from a lack of legal timber, and corruption that started during, but is not limited to, the former Suharto dictatorship.

Over the past two decades, the volume of timber harvested on Borneo exceeded that of all tropical wood exports from Latin America and Africa combined. At its height in the mid-1990s it was a \$9 billion-a-year industry. Now it's nearly gone -- more than 90 percent of the Indonesia's timber production is illegal.

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