

On the occasion of the European Climate Diplomacy Day (17 June), the Delegation of the European Union (EU) in Jakarta has adopted Aras – a young elephant from the Leuser Ecosystem – as its mascot, to bring public attention to the importance of conservation and how this contributes to the fight against climate change.

Leuser – one of the world’s critical ecosystems

The Leuser Ecosystem covers 2.6 million hectares of largely undisturbed tropical rainforest in the provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra and is among the top 25 critical ecosystems in the world. It is also the only place on earth where orangutans, tigers, elephants and rhinoceros still co-exist in an area large enough to guarantee their long-term survival.

The Leuser Ecosystem also absorbs large quantities of Carbon Dioxide making it a powerful modulator of regional climate and a carbon sink with a unique mitigating role against global climate change. In recognition of this and its biodiversity resources, the EU over the past 20 years strongly supported the Government of Indonesia decision to protect Aceh and North Sumatra's forests through a number of projects with a total contribution of € 52 million.

LIF – established to ensure continued conservation activities

One such effort by the EU was the Leuser Development Programme (LDP) implemented in 1997-2004 to support the ecosystem long-term conservation and the sustainable development of its surrounding areas. Part of the sustainability strategy of the LDP was the creation of an independent management body, the Leuser International Foundation (LIF), which was aimed at continuing conservation activities after EU and other donors' support ended. Over the years, LIF has grown into a full capacity self-sustaining organisation.

Aras Napal and the Elephant Patrol Unit

An activity which has successfully survived the test of time and the end of donors' funding is

the Aras Napal Elephant Patrol Unit (EPU). Located in the North Sumatra part of the Leuser Ecosystem, on the edge of the proposed Gunung Leuser National Park, the EPU was established under the LDP in 2000, with trained elephants coming from Southern Sumatra, with the objective to monitor and protect the eastern corner of the Leuser Ecosystem and Aras Napal forest areas.

Today the EPU is still running at full capacity. Working closely with the Leuser National Park Management Body (BTNGL) and the North Sumatra Conservation Agency (KSDA), it is sustained by some private and donors' funding and it works to reduce human-wildlife conflicts and conduct elephant forest patrols, preventing damaging activities such as encroachment, illegal logging and poaching. Educational events for schools, eco-tourism activities and university research are also carried out. At the moment the EPU has three full-grown elephants: Aini, Tanti and Dion. Tanti gave birth to a male baby elephant, Aras, on 29 June 2008.

Adopting Aras – a symbol of commitment and hope

“The adoption of little Aras, less than two weeks before his 7th birthday, symbolises the enduring and renewing efforts of many committed stakeholders who have made the Aras Napal EPU a success story over the years,” said Mr Franck Viault, Head of Cooperation of the EU Delegation to Indonesia. “It is a recognition and a testimony to the significance of a project that many years after its termination is still able to generate new hope and provide assurance that well spent investments and hard work from many – including the EPU mahouts who dedicate their entire life to take care and work with one elephant – can indeed materialise into a positive legacy for future generations, a legacy which can successfully and gracefully stand in the way of destructive forces and vested interests,” added Mr Viault.

Due to the presence of the EPU since the year 2000, the forests of the Besitang Sekundur area near Aras Napal have been able to continue their slow recovery from logging that occurred during the 1980s. Compared with the forests to the south of this area which have largely disappeared and have been transformed into oil palm plantations, the rich lowland forests patrolled by the EPU are in good condition and contain most of the megafauna for which Sumatra is famous worldwide, including Sumatra orangutans and wild elephants.

Through this achievement the EPU has also been able to provide a small but steady and visible contribution to the fight against climate change and young Aras represents well these efforts,

at a time when Sumatra's rich natural forests have shrunk by half in only one generation. It is estimated that 70% of Sumatra elephants' lowland natural forest habitat has disappeared in the past 25 years and the number of Sumatra wild elephants have diminished to only 2,500 with increased conflicts between them and farming communities. As a result the Sumatra elephant, a subspecies of the Asian elephant, is now on the list of critically endangered species.

“In the wake of a rapidly changing climate, preserving the integrity of the Leuser Ecosystem is an important and more than ever urgent responsibility to which we should commit ourselves with the same renewed and exuberant energy that little Aras shows in his daily activities at the EPU,” said Mr Viault.

The EU believes that inconsiderate and unselective deforestation only generates marginal short-term gains while conservation and sustainable cautious management of Indonesia's natural resources is a way to invest in long-term socio-economic progress for future generations. “Aras Napal symbolises all this and we are proud to announce on the occasion of Climate Diplomacy Day 2015 the adoption of little Aras, its nomination as the EU special permanent envoy in the Leuser Ecosystem and the official mascot of the EU Delegation to Indonesia,” stated Mr Viault.



<http://www.leuserfoundation.org>

<http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/indonesia>