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Irian Jaya



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Geography

Irian Jaya is one of only three places on earth where one can stand on snow-capped mountain peaks on the Equator. The name, Irian Jaya, is a combination of Biak dialect and Indonesian words that roughly means "glorious shimmering land".

Occupying the western half of the island of New Guinea, Irian Jaya is Indonesia's largest province. With an area of 410,000km² (roughly the size of united Germany), it makes up 22 per cent of Indonesia's land area.

Biological diversity

Nearly 80 per cent of Irian Jaya is still covered with undisturbed primary forests. Besides the forests, Irian Jaya also has some spectacular coastal and marine habitats, with largely undisturbed coral reef formations. In addition, some of the best, most extensive and least disturbed wetlands in the Asia/Pacific region can be found here. The main wetland habitats are peat swamps, freshwater swamps and mangrove forests.

This ecosystem diversity gives rise to a wide range of flora and fauna:

- Over 150 known mammal species, of which 100 are endemic.
- At least 700 bird species, about eight per cent of the world's total. These include birds of paradise, crowned pigeons, cassowaries, cockatoos and parrots.
- Some 6,000 to 7,000 fish species.
- 579 known amphibian and reptile species.
- About 9,000 plant species, of which 90 per cent are endemic. These include valuable timber trees such as the black

walnut, black ebony and ironwood. In addition, one out of every three plants in Irian Jaya is an orchid.

Protected areas

Fifty-seven areas, 12 of which are marine, totalling about 82,000km² or 20 per cent of Irian Jaya, have been proposed or designated as protected. Important protected areas receiving WWF support include the Arfak Mountains Nature Reserve, Teluk Cenderawasih Marine National Park, Cyclops Mountains Nature Reserve, Wasur National Park, Teluk Bintuni Mangrove Nature Reserve and the proposed Lorentz Nature Reserve.

People

The population of Irian Jaya is still relatively small — about 1.6 million. However, there are hundreds of tribes, many living in isolated valleys, speaking some 240 different languages. Most of the people are hunter-gatherers, farmers or fishermen.

Conservation threats

As Irian Jaya's population is still small, large parts of the land surface are in pristine or near pristine condition. However, there is increasing pressure on the land for agricultural use, timber and mineral exploitation, and from the government's transmigration programme, which resettles people from crowded islands such as Java.

WWF involvement

WWF started work in Irian Jaya in March 1980. Beginning with a wildlife-focused conservation programme, it gradually changed to people-focused conservation,

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designed and implemented by a cadre of Irianese conservationists.

Working closely with local people at the village level is paramount to WWF's conservation efforts, especially in Irian Jaya where traditional land rights still hold. WWF's efforts focus on justifying protected areas on the basis of their contribution to local communities, promoting acceptance of conservation management on tribal lands, and ensuring community participation in identifying and managing protected area boundaries. These efforts are supported and strengthened by social and economic assistance initiatives.

For example, in the Arfak Nature Reserve which encompasses much of the Hatam people's tribal lands, local village committees are now managing and protecting the reserve boundary under the guidance and assistance of the Indonesian Directorate-General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation (PHPA) and WWF.

The Hatams themselves decide on the boundaries and control access to the reserve. They establish and enforce rules allowing certain activities in the reserve, and forbidding others.

Permitted activities include rearing butterflies (which will subsequently be sold to western collectors) under a WWF scheme devised to provide the people with economic incentives to protect the remote area. The Arfak reserve has some 5,000 known butterfly and moth species, and is the centre of endemism of the large and flashy birdwing butterflies, for which collectors pay handsomely.

Once the people understand the relationship between maintaining the forest to provide good populations of butterflies, a direct link between forest conservation and income generation is forged. Close to 1,500 individual families are now involved in the butterfly farming scheme.

In another protected area, the Cyclops Nature Reserve, local communities not only agree where the boundaries should be but also mark the boundaries by planting fruit and furniture-wood trees, which they use themselves or sell. WWF provides the people with seedlings, and it has also set up a one-hectare farm plot where people are shown improved agricultural techniques.

WWF has also introduced fish farming, which provides villagers with a source of food and income, and induces protection of the reserve. It helped build and stock a network of fish ponds, involving 100 families. These fish ponds need a constant supply of clean fresh water, available only if the Cyclops forest cover is maintained.

Local tribal councils and land-owners as well as local government already recognized Cyclops's important water catchment role, and have identified this as the strongest justification for conserving the reserve. To reinforce this, billboards and posters feature Mr. Barnabas Suebu, Governor of Irian Jaya, urging the people to protect the reserve with the message: "Our water supplies, our rivers, lakes, our cultural heritage and even our lives depend on it."

WWF Irian Jaya projects

- Development of protected areas in Irian Jaya
- Implementation of conservation programme in Irian Jaya
- Conservation management in the proposed Lorentz Nature Reserve
- Conservation management in Wasur-Rawa Biru National Park
- Development of Cyclops Nature Reserve
- Development of Teluk Cenderawasih Marine National Park
- Development of Arfak Mountains Nature Reserve
- Species conservation/monitoring in Irian Jaya
- Support and assistance to local NGOs
- Conservation education and awareness in Irian Jaya
- Biak Numfor/Yapen Waropen Reserve

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For more information on WWF's field projects, please contact:

The Regional Communications Officer
Conservation News Service
WWF International
Avenue du Mont-Blanc
CH-1196 Gland, Switzerland.
Tel: (41-22) 364 91 11, fax: (41-22) 364 53 58.

