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**Press Release**  
**Documentary Film *17 Sweet Letters*:**  
**Are Conservation Areas Really Conserved?**

**Cali, Colombia – October 31, 2024** – A new documentary film, “**17 Sweet Letters**”, invites viewers to explore the other side of environmental protection in Indonesia and question the efficiency of designated protected areas in safeguarding ecosystems and its biodiversity. The film premiere took place on Thursday, October 31, 2024 in Cali, Colombia, the location of the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The documentary was made by *Ekspedisi Indonesia Baru* in collaboration with environmental organizations such as Auriga Nusantara, Forest Watch Indonesia, HAKA Foundation, Greenpeace Indonesia and Pusaka Bentala Rakyat.

**17 Sweet Letters** tells the true story of the struggle of civil society who have sent 17 letters and reports to the relevant authorities, especially the Ministry of Forestry of the Republic of Indonesia, reporting the ongoing illegal deforestation in The Rawa Singkil wildlife reserve, Aceh. This area is a peat forest, part of The Leuser Ecosystem, the only ecosystem co-inhabited by the megafauna Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) elephant (*Elephas maximus sumatrensis*), tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*) and Sumatran orangutan (*Pongo abelii*).

Despite the wildlife reserves being one of the most protected areas, forest destruction activities in Rawa Singkil continue to occur. This film also exposes a major problem of forest destruction from illegal oil palm expansion in the Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve to supply large corporations with a range of global products. Farwiza Farhan, Chairperson of HAKA Foundation expressed her concern as this problems reflect weak law enforcement in an area considered “sacred” for ecosystem and wildlife conservation. “If this destruction continues, we will not only lose critical ecosystems but also threaten the sustainability of local communities who depend on these forests,” said Farwiza Farhan.



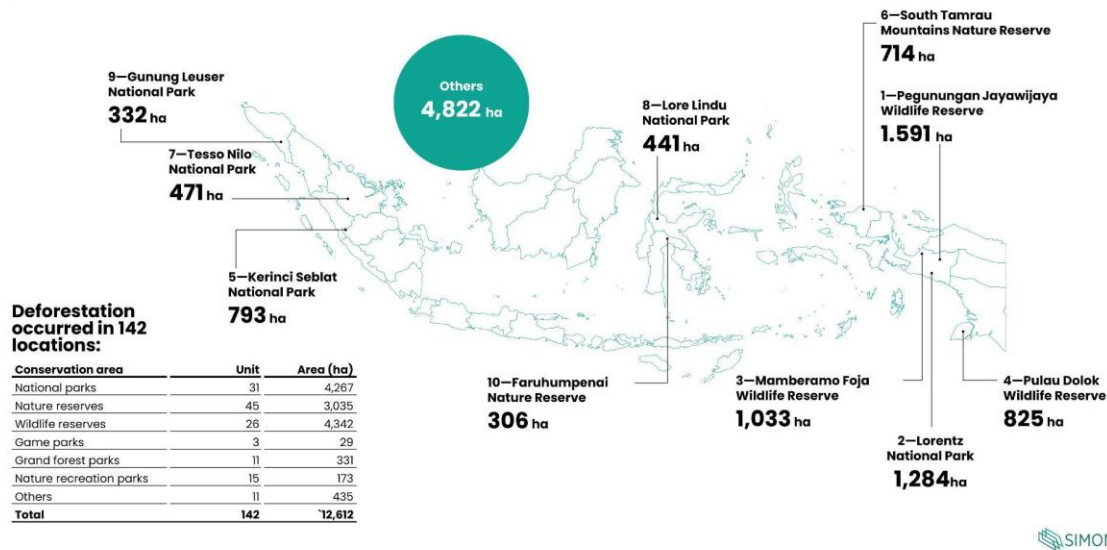
*Forest conversion to oil palm plantations in The Rawa Singkil wildlife reserve. Photo: February 2024 by Auriga Nusantara/Fajar Simanjuntak*

The tragedy of deforestation in The Rawa Singkil wildlife reserve corroborates the findings of the National History Museum regarding [the increasing decline in biodiversity intactness](#) in the world. Many conservation practices by designating protected areas to be managed alone by the government [have not been necessarily better for biodiversity](#), rather the government should encourage and recognize Indigenous Peoples and Local communities-conserved areas as it has long proven to be beneficial for biodiversity.

“The cases raised in this film are not only about forest destruction but also forms of neglect of the rights of indigenous peoples and damage to important ecosystems. *17 Sweet Letters* is a reminder to all of us that the promise of forest protection must be realized in real action, not just a slogan,” said Mufti Barri, Executive Director of Forest Watch Indonesia.

This can be seen in Tesso Nilo National Park, Riau. Auriga Nusantara's analysis shows deforestation of 59,603 hectares, or 73% of this protected area, even after it was designated as a national park in 2004. Likewise, the Dangku Wildlife Sanctuary in South Sumatra has only 23% natural forest left from an area of 48,009 hectares.

## 2023 deforestation inside conservation areas (12,612 ha)



SIMONTINI

In the last two years, Indonesia's deforestation rate has been increasing, including in protected areas which in 2023 alone reached 12,612 hectares (as shown from the data above). This increase in deforestation is mainly due to the continued issuance of conversion licenses by the Ministry of Forestry, as well as the expansion of timber plantation licenses in Kalimantan, and national strategic projects, such as the 2 million hectares food and energy estate project in South Papua.

"This film exposes how forest destruction is happening systematically, even in areas that should be legally protected," said Arie Rompas, team leader forest campaigner of Greenpeace Indonesia. Arie Rompas also emphasized how **17 Letters** is also intended to demand the Indonesian government to truly stop deforestation and ensure the preservation of protected areas.

Timer Manurung, Chairman of Auriga Nusantara, expressed his regrets regarding the continuous deforestation happening in protected areas since protected areas already have specific management units and specific laws with a set of implementing regulations. "If deforestation can still occur in those protected areas, a big question mark arose for the fate of natural forests and its biodiversity in other forest zones. Around 86% or 72.6 million hectares of Indonesia's natural forests are outside of protected areas," Timer concluded.

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