

DEVASTATION FROM COAL MINING IN SOUTH KALIMANTAN, INDONESIA



In the five years or so that I have been a climate and energy campaigner with Greenpeace Southeast Asia I have often visited scenes of environmental destruction caused by corporate and human greed.

So many beautiful areas of our country have been destroyed in the name of investment and development and transformed into large-scale plantations, industrial areas or coal mines. Something that sticks in my memory is the horrendous damage to the environment and landscape in Asam-asam, in South Kalimantan, in the Indonesian part of the island of Borneo.

Coal mining has been expanding extremely rapidly there, and in 2011 the region produced one-third of Indonesia's coal. As coal production has increased, so have the negative impacts on the province's people and environment.

Asam-asam is one of the areas of South Kalimantan where there are several coal mining concessions owned by Indonesian companies such as PT. Arutmin Indonesia and PT. Jorong Barutama Greston, and the giant Thai company Banpu.

With others from Greenpeace Indonesia, I first visited the area in July 2013 as part of our research and investigation into the environmental impact and water pollution caused by coal mining in the province, which is the second largest coal producing region in Indonesia.

At the PT. Arutmin concession, as far as the eye can see there are dozens, maybe hundreds, of small lakes formed from abandoned coal mine pits that have filled with water. What is striking is the range of colours: blues, browns, orange, black. The water contains toxic pollutants, such as heavy metals, that are extremely harmful to the environment and potentially place surrounding communities at risk.

We took water samples at five coal mining concessions. The vast majority of these were found to be far more acidic than official standards permit.

Local environmental authorities have failed to stop or prevent mining operations from breaking the law. Discharges, leaks and spills from contaminated ponds in coal concessions pose grave dangers to nearby creeks, swamps, and rivers.

The problem is not limited to the Asam-asam area alone. Our research indicates that that around 3,000 km of South Kalimantan's rivers – almost 45% of the total – are downstream from coal mines and hence potentially at risk of toxic pollution from various coal concessions and illegal operations.

What we found during our field investigation is in line with the results of a government water quality survey of a number of rivers in South Kalimantan in 2013. The survey showed that the rapid expansion of coal mining over the previous 15 years had contributed to the poor water quality found in the region today, which has driven up public spending to provide safe drinking water.

Beside leaving behind hundreds of toxic mining pits, coal mining operations in Asam-asam have left a landscape that is barren and desolate. Seeing this reminded me of a report I'd read that said that by 2030 the island of Borneo could be suffering from desertification. The process of desertification has already started in Asam-asam.

According to a local resident, coal mining in Asam-asam not only destroys the landscape but has also eliminated many of the rivers that once flowed through the area. We heard that before coal mining arrived people had never experienced drought during the dry season or floods in the rainy season but now both calamities are part of a growing water problem.

What I saw in Asam-asam is not supposed to happen. But the authorities have turned a blind eye. Every citizen of Indonesia, including the community in Asam-asam deserves the environment to be protected, access to clean water, sanitation, and a bright future.

The coal mining companies that are causing this environmental damage, water pollution, and landscape destruction in South Kalimantan should be held responsible.

Some companies that we investigated had previously been found to be violating regulations designed to protect human health and the environment and had been warned by the authorities. Tougher action is needed.

Indonesia's authorities must stop the coal industry from continuing to poison local water sources and the environment, and should be brave enough to revoke the licenses of companies that are breaking the law.

In the wider scheme of things, the government needs to change the country's energy policy, and end dependence on dirty fossil fuels. The coal industry's contribution to the Indonesian economy is not comparable to the destruction they have wrought.

It is time for Indonesia to put an end to the age of coal, and start a new bright era of clean, renewable energy.

Source: <http://endcoal.org/resources/devastation-from-coal-mining-in-south-kalimantan-indonesia/?ref=water>