

Business-as-usual management is not suitable for peatland agriculture

📌 peatlands 📌 letters

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Raymond Ten pix

Following the 16th International Peat Congress (IPC) in Kuching (Sarawak), Malaysia in August 2016, widely-read media reported that the congress supported the view that current agricultural practices in peatland areas, such as plantations, do not have a negative impact on the environment. However, this view is not shared by many of the participants, and does not reflect the broad message conveyed by the research presented at the congress.

In an effort to correct these statements, a number of the world's leading peatland researchers and practitioners have come together to publish a letter in *Global Change Biology*, one of the world's top environmental science journals. The 139 authors represent 115 government, academic, industry and non-governmental organizations from 20 countries.

Eighteen of these organizations are based in Malaysia and another 22 in Indonesia and Singapore; the three countries most directly impacted by the adverse consequences of unsustainable management of tropical peatlands.

The consensus achieved in this paper is unprecedented and confirms that the weight of evidence backed by many decades of scientific research, is unequivocal: business-as-usual management is not sustainable for tropical peatland agriculture and can no longer be justified.

While truly sustainable peatland agriculture methods do not yet exist, the scientific community and industry are already collaborating in the search for solutions, including interim measures to mitigate ongoing rates of peat loss under existing plantations. Not only is this of global importance in the fight against climate change, it is also key to ensure future economic wealth in tropical peatland rich countries like Malaysia.

Indeed, failing to recognize the devastating far-reaching consequences of the way in which peatlands are being managed and failing to work together to address them could mean that the next generations will in fact have to deal with an irreversibly altered, dysfunctional landscape.

Faizal Parish, co-chair of the Peatland Working Group (2010-2012) of the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and one of the paper co-authors - stated that “the negative impacts of development on peatland has been widely recognised by many oil palm plantation companies in the region. RSPO requires strict management measures for any existing plantations on peat and discourages new plantations.

“Many leading Malaysian companies have stopped any further development of palm oil on peat in recognition of the significant problems of subsidence, flooding and fires often associated with peatland development.”

He added “Inappropriate development of peatlands is one of the main root causes of the local and transboundary smoke haze that has been seriously affecting Malaysia and other countries in Asean in recent years. An estimated 90 percent of the transboundary haze is coming from peatland fires and as a result the Indonesian government has taken strong measures to stop any further development of peatlands and restore 2 million ha of degraded peatlands by 2020.”

In Malaysia we need to be more proactive to come with solutions to prevent subsidence and degradation of peatlands.

Dr Alexander Sayok of the Faculty of Resource Science and Technology of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and another co-author confirmed that “data from our field investigation and examination of written records in 2015 while undertaking an assessment of floods in peat swamps within the lower Rajang River basin, showed that development of peat swamps into large scale agriculture (mainly oil palm) had caused substantial subsidence of the lands involved.

“Consequently, such activities had not only resulted in a wider area being flooded but of longer duration during wet monsoon seasons.”

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