



## SPECIAL REPORT

# PEATLAND MANAGEMENT & REHABILITATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: MOVING FROM CONFLICT TO COLLABORATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | APRIL 2017

This report provides a holistic overview and analysis of the current opinions and approaches with regards to managing peatlands in Southeast Asia. Peatlands are a special type of ecosystem containing areas covered with peat, a type of soil largely formed from partially decayed organisms. These give peat a much higher organic content as compared to mineral soil. Southeast Asia contains large peatland areas, mostly in Indonesia and Malaysia, which naturally exist as waterlogged forests known as peat swamp forests.

The intention of this report is not to advocate for a particular approach, but to highlight the areas of overlap, the opportunities for coordination and collaboration between stakeholders, and why such collaboration is essential.

## INTRODUCTION

**Southeast Asia's peatlands have become the subject of increasing national and international attention as their links with major concerns such as forest fires, biodiversity loss, health impacts, and climate change grow clearer.** However, the issue of managing and rehabilitating these peatlands runs the risk of becoming mired in polemical discourse due to the existence of multiple, seemingly incompatible viewpoints on the best course of action for using peatlands. Specifically, disagreements have arisen regarding how to best strike the balance between developing peatlands for agriculture and mitigating the concerns stated above. This paper will show that although these viewpoints seem to be incompatible on the surface, they nevertheless present several points of overlap and opportunities for coordination and collaboration when examined in greater detail.

Peatland management and rehabilitation in Southeast Asia can be examined on **three levels**:

## LEVEL 1: FRAMEWORK

The first level of analysis involves looking at the regional and national frameworks available to govern or provide direction on how peatlands are managed. On a regional level, there exists an ASEAN Peatland Management Strategy. On the country level, the two countries containing the largest peatland areas in Southeast Asia – Malaysia and Indonesia – both have national-level plans for peatland management, but they differ radically in terms of aims and jurisdiction.

ASEAN



**The ASEAN Peatland Management Strategy** provides member countries with guidance on creating National Action Plans for Peatlands and creating demonstration sites for peatland best management practices, among other initiatives. However, the guidelines provided and initiatives recommended have failed to prevent the recurrence of problems associated with unsustainable peatland management. This is because this framework is non-binding and its initiatives are disproportionate in scale to the vastness of Southeast Asia's peatland area.

MALAYSIA



**Malaysia's National Action Plan for Peatlands**, launched in 2011, is a set of guidelines for peatland management that are not legally binding. The Plan does not provide detailed information on water management, which is crucial for preventing dry peatlands from catching fire, and gives only general information on fire prevention. In addition, there are strong indications that Malaysia intends to develop the large areas of peatland that remain in Sarawak for agricultural purposes.

INDONESIA



**Indonesia's framework for peatland management** is more comprehensive. Indonesia's regulation PP57/2016 has set out specific, quantified definitions, rules, and standards governing cultivation activities on peat. Indonesia has also established a Peatland Restoration Agency (Badan Restorasi Gambut, or BRG) that is charged with coordinating and facilitating sustainable peatland management in seven provinces: Riau, Jambi, South Sumatra, West Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, South Kalimantan, and Papua. BRG is targeting the rehabilitation of 2.1 million hectares of degraded peatland by 2020. Finally, Indonesia has issued a moratorium on new licences to develop plantations on peat until the government finishes mapping all its peatlands and zoning protection areas.

## LEVEL 2: APPROACHES

The second level of analysis, which explores current approaches to peatland, provides an insight into why there is no single, universal framework that harmonises and codifies ASEAN's member countries' approaches towards managing their peatlands.

These approaches can be classified into three main categories:



The difficulty with adopting one universal approach is that environmental protection and the conversion of peatlands to agricultural use are commonly viewed as incompatible. This has led to ongoing controversy and disagreement between proponents of each approach.

## LEVEL 3: OPPORTUNITIES FOR COORDINATION & COLLABORATION

The third level of analysis looks at the points of overlap and opportunities for coordination and collaboration among the three approaches. These points can provide policymakers, funders, and agricultural companies with a means to look beyond any current differences in the extent to which they balance cultivation and rehabilitation, and instead focus on efforts to strengthen elements that each of the approaches have in common.

### LANDSCAPE APPROACH

Each of the three approaches (“full cultivation”, “full protection”, and “middle”) needs to incorporate elements of the **landscape approach** in order to achieve its objectives. Taking a landscape approach means engaging and incorporating all the actors and land uses within a peat system to maximise efficiency, minimise conflict, and improve the chances of achieving the implementer's objectives. The landscape approach is particularly important for peatland systems because activities on one part of the peat system have a direct and significant effect on activities in other parts of the system.

All three approaches to peatland use share common elements under the landscape approach. These are:

-  + Engagement with local communities
-  + Fire-readiness
-  + Protection, monitoring & evaluation

The “full protection” and “middle” approaches incorporate additional elements to maximise the success of peatland rehabilitation efforts. These include:

-  + Rewetting
-  + Revegetation
-  + Developing alternative livelihoods

## CONCLUSION

Currently, too much attention has been focused on the divide between cultivating and rehabilitating peatland. As a result, stakeholders have overlooked the opportunities that exist to work together. Building on these opportunities can produce better knowledge of best practices for peatland management and agriculture. This has the potential to reduce the risk of fire and flooding, as well as to improve agricultural yields and profits. Building on these opportunities will have significant knock-on effects, such as ameliorating climate change, improving the health of people across the ASEAN region, and raising the standards of living of peatland communities.

## About the SIIA's Sustainability Programme

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The SIIA's sustainability programme focuses on haze caused by fires in Indonesia and on the sustainability of the plantation sector, both key issues for Singapore. The SIIA also works on climate change issues facing ASEAN and Asia.

The SIIA's sustainability work goes back to 1997, when it organised Singapore's first haze dialogue with the Singapore Environment Council. Over the years, the SIIA has increasingly broadened its sustainability work from haze to related issues, such as forest governance and sustainable livelihoods. In 2014, the SIIA launched the annual **Singapore Dialogue on Sustainable World Resources**, now in its 4th year, to highlight best practices within the plantation industry. In 2016, the SIIA co-organised the **Regional Peat Restoration Workshop**, the first NGO-led regional workshop to focus on peat restoration, in Jakarta with the NGO consortium Indonesian Conservation Communication Forum (FKKI).

The SIIA also recognises the importance of public outreach and education in creating sustainable environmental solutions. It curated Singapore's first public exhibition on haze, "**Haze: Know it. Stop it**", and supports the local NGO **People's Movement to Stop Haze** in its efforts to promote responsible consumerism among Singaporeans. The SIIA has also launched **HazeTracker** ([www.hazetracker.org](http://www.hazetracker.org)), a one-stop portal for haze-related maps and general information.

## About This Report

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This is the Executive Summary of "**Peatland Management & Rehabilitation in Southeast Asia: Moving from Conflict to Collaboration**", a Special Report by SIIA. The information and opinions in this report were sourced through interviews with academics, NGO representatives, and other experts; a review of the current literature; and site visits to communities living in peatland areas.

The full version of the report will be released online on the SIIA website by **July 2017**.

## About the SIIA

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The **Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA)** is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation dedicated to the research, analysis, and discussion of politics, economics, and sustainability. Founded in 1962, it is Singapore's oldest think tank and ranks as one of the top think tanks in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The SIIA regularly convenes dialogues and roundtables to inform policy makers, business professionals, and the public on issues facing the international community. Recent examples include a Minister's Dialogue on the investment outlook for Myanmar in December 2016, held in conjunction with the Myanmar Investment Commission, and a closed-door corporate briefing in Jakarta in April 2016, which focused on Indonesian politics and their business implications. Many leading Singapore-based corporates and financial institutions are SIIA members.

*Cover image: Satellite map of peatlands in Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia. Orange areas indicates peatland. Yellow and green areas indicate likely oil palm plantations. Purple and pink areas indicate likely pulp and paper plantations.*

*Cover image source: Centre for Remote Imaging, Sensing and Processing (CRISP), National University of Singapore*

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