

This is an abstract take from an article written by Angela Benton-Browne, for the BOS-USA newsletter

It was a hot day in August. The fire prevention education team arrived in Taruna village. Our hired blue pickup truck stopped at the side of the Trans-Kalimantan road next to a run down wooden hut that was once a shop. This was to be our home for the next week. The school head Pak Calvin, and his wife, were out fishing for their evening meal. Their children told us to make ourselves at home. So we piled out the truck and unloaded boxes of school teaching aids, stationary, puppet show equipment, rattan mats to sleep on, cooking utensils, and food.

Taruna is a small village of 18 families only half an hour from the provincial capital Palangka Raya. Life is hard here as any crops planted either burn in the dry season or flood in the wet season. Jobs are difficult to come by and the families often put together to buy rice. Fishing is important as it provides a staple diet. Taruna is beautiful in a strange way, especially when you know that the settlement is an ex-logging concession that has only been a village for 15 years. Flat and desolate land stretches for miles – grassy open peatland with dead and burned trees and small black-water canals – the result of years of draining and burning of peatswamp forest.

Taruna was one of 13 villages that we visited between April and August 2003 along the Trans-Kalimantan road and Kahayan and Sebangau Rivers. Our team was made of students and NGO workers from the Orangutan Tropical Peatland Project (OuTrop), Yayasan Cakrawala Indonesia (YCI) and the Centre for International Management of Tropical Peatlands (CIMTROP). This travelling workshop aimed to use environmental education to raise community awareness about forest exploitation and canals as the root causes of peatland and forest fire. Each village was targeted because it had been badly affected by fire and is within or near to the Mega Rice Project (MRP). The MRP was a disastrous peat development project that aimed to clear 1 million hectares of peatland for rice cultivation. Unfortunately only 30% was suitable for this and the rest now lies deserted, flooding and burning each year. Many believe it to be the World's greatest ecological disaster.

Peatland drainage and forest fire is a huge problem in Kalimantan. Within the last 10 years millions of hectares of tropical peat forest in Southeast Asia have been lost to fire. In 97 and 98 they caused a 33% decline in the orangutan population. Unlike other fire, peat burns under the ground producing eerie looking smoke that smells bitter and sweet. This smoke releases huge amounts of carbon into the atmosphere that contributes to global warming. In fact it is estimated that fires from the entire world's tropical forests in 1998 released 1-2 billion tones of carbon, equivalent to one third of the emissions from fossil fuel burning worldwide. It is highly noxious with small particles that penetrate deep into the lungs. Those living in the smoke not only suffer coughs, and eye and skin irritations but serious long-term illnesses such as cancer and asthma.

During the travelling workshop, the team conducted activities within primary, junior and senior high schools. There were also adult workshops and a puppet show that was performed by children for their

community. Each activity facilitated the community through a process of awareness: from their own experience and thoughts on the fires, what peat and peatswamp forest is to the affects of canals and other exploitation and possible solutions for fire prevention. For children, among other fun and creative activities there were games, role-play, stories and poster making. Adults created a timeline of their village and discussed the connection between events. Some children performed the puppet show to their community. This included poetry and a quiz that highlighted the importance of peatswamp forest and the draining affect of the canals, which make the forest much more susceptible to fires.

Each village has a different history, experience of fire and even different education levels; so each workshop had a specific approach. To do this much time was spent preparing for and evaluating each activity. Overall the communities' response to our activities was incredibly encouraging. We found that the puppet show especially brought positive attitude and motivation. Living with and being part of the community played a huge role in our success. Building a trusting relationship is essential in having a voice and receiving active participation.

Practical fire prevention skills within the community are essential. CIMTROP and OuTrop are currently working with an environmental government department in Palangka Raya to train community-run fire fighting teams. This training includes community awareness initiatives and participation and local management of fire prevention and fighting. YCI are currently preparing for a long-term environmental education programme for areas of orangutan distribution. They are using their experiences from working on the fire prevention education programme and other programmes to create a holistic, participatory school and community education programme.

One of the suggestions made for long-term fire prevention is land rehabilitation. After our school lesson in Taruna one child planted a tree outside his home. The story soon spread of what this child had done and more children wanted to do the same. We are aware that this cannot solve the problem of forest fire on its own, but sowing the seed of a better understanding of the problem and a wish to do something about it is the first fundamental step.

So what can you do? The fight for the conservation of Indonesia's natural resources continues. Community education, awareness and action are essential for this. However outside Indonesia there is also a role to play through ethical consumerism and support for sustainable practices.