

Leuser Ecosystem

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In news: Recently, an investigation by global watchdog Rainforest Action Network (RAN) has shown that food and cosmetic companies as well as financial institutions have links with companies implicated in the destruction of the Leuser Ecosystem, a forest area on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia.

Key findings

- RAN's investigation claimed the following companies for procured oil from and financed the Royal Golden Eagle (RGE) group, which has established the destructive oil palm and pulp plantations in the area through subsidiary companies.
- RGE, for example, procures palm oil from a mill supplied by PT Tualang Raya, a palm oil producer in the Leuser Ecosystem, the investigation claimed.
- PT Tualang Raya is also known to have cleared at least 60 hectares of lowland rainforest in the Leuser Ecosystem over the past six months. This is three times the rate of clearance in the last six months.
- RAN investigation pointed out that many of these companies and banks had pledged to conserve the environment.

About the Leuser Ecosystem

- **Location:** The Leuser Ecosystem is an area of forest located in the provinces of Aceh and North Sumatra on the island of Sumatra in Indonesia



- Covering more than 2.6 million hectares it is one of the richest expanses of tropical rain forest in Southeast Asia and is the last place on earth where the Sumatran elephant, rhino, tiger and orangutan are found within one are
- It has one of the world's richest yet least-known forest systems, and its vegetation is an important source of Earth's oxygen.
- **Biodiversity:** Home to over 105 mammal species, 382 bird species, and 95 reptile and amphibian species, the Leuser Ecosystem is one of the last remaining habitats where so much wildlife can still thrive.
- **Unique feature:** This rainforest is said to be the only place left on Earth where tigers, orangutans, elephants

and rhinos still coexist in the wild.

- Threat: Palm oil, Pulp and Paper industries and mining continue to threaten its ecosystem therefore deforestation is bringing the Leuser Ecosystem's wildlife to the very brink of extinction.
- Around 70-75% of Aceh's people live on the coastal plains of Sumatra, where many communities have established wet rice cultivation. They heavily depend upon the food and water supplied by this ecosystem

Palm Oil

- Palm oil is an edible vegetable oil derived from the mesocarp (reddish pulp) of the fruit of the oil palms, primarily the African oil palm *Elaeis guineensis* and to a lesser extent from the American oil palm *Elaeis oleifera* and the maripa palm *Attalea maripa*.
- The use of palm oil in food and beauty products has attracted the concern of environmental groups; the high oil yield of the trees has encouraged wider cultivation, leading to the clearing of forests in parts of Indonesia and Malaysia to make space for oil-palm monoculture.
- This has resulted in significant acreage losses of the natural habitat of the three surviving species of orangutan

Orangutan

- They are great apes native to Indonesia and Malaysia.
- They are found in the rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra, but during the Pleistocene they ranged throughout Southeast Asia and South China.
- Classified in the genus *Pongo*, orangutans were originally considered to be one species
- The orangutans are the only surviving species of the subfamily Ponginae, who split from humans, chimpanzees and gorillas 19.3 to 15.7 million years ago (mya).

New species

- The newly described Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*) exists in an isolated population of around 800 individuals in the Batang Toru forests in Sumatra, Indonesia.
- The species occurs only in around 1100 km² of forests in the Central, North and South districts of Tapanuli, in the province of North Sumatra.
- Until recently, it was thought that only two species of orangutan existed; the Bornean (*Pongo pygmaeus*) and Sumatran (*Pongo abelii*).
- Orangutans are found only in Indonesia and Malaysia and are listed as Critically Endangered on The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.