

POLICYBRIEF

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Safeguarding the Forests of Southeast Asia for a Resilient Future

Farida Ayu, Geetha Mohan, Chethika Gunasiri, Martiwi Setiadi, Pu Jian, Naoya Wada, Kensuke Fukushi, Hideki Kuramitz and Masita Dwi Mandini Manessa

Highlights

The tropical forests of Southeast Asia are essential for livelihoods, biodiversity and global carbon regulation. Yet they are rapidly degrading due to deforestation, agricultural expansion, illegal logging, infrastructure development and climate change. Fragmented governance, limited regional coordination and inadequate policy integration across ASEAN hinder effective forest conservation, leading to insecure Indigenous land rights and insufficient financing. Urgent, coordinated action is needed to halt biodiversity loss, protect communities and strengthen climate resilience.

Recommendations:

- Enhance forest governance through transboundary cooperation and legal harmonization
- Ensure inclusive landscape-based forest management that integrates Indigenous knowledge
- Develop participatory monitoring and evaluation systems for adaptive forest governance
- Advance financing and incentive mechanisms for forest conservation through regional green funds

Tropical Forests in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia hosts approximately 15% of the world's tropical forests, covering more than 200 million hectares and supporting some of the highest levels of terrestrial biodiversity globally (Hughes 2017; Myers et al. 2000). These forests provide crucial ecosystem services such as climate regulation, water filtration, soil stabilization and carbon sequestration (FAO 2020), while sustaining the livelihoods and cultural heritage of more than 140 million forest-dependent individuals, including Indigenous communities (Poffenberger 2006). However, between 2001 and 2025, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries lost about 64.9 million hectares of tree cover, including 19.1 million hectares of primary forest (Global Forest Watch 2026). Forest loss is driven primarily by commercial agriculture, infrastructure expansion, illegal logging and unsustainable forestry practices (Sloan et al. 2019), while climate change intensifies these pressures through prolonged droughts, forest fires and flooding.

The region is also home to more than 20,000 plant species and 2,000 endemic vertebrate species, many of which are critically endangered due to habitat loss (Hughes 2017; Sodhi et al. 2004). Forest degradation threatens biodiversity and essential ecosystem services, including food, fuelwood and medicinal

plants that support rural livelihoods. If current deforestation trends continue, up to 29% of bird species and 24% of mammals could be lost by 2100 (Wilcove et al. 2013). Effective implementation of the ASEAN Biodiversity Plan 2024–2030, alongside the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), is essential to halt biodiversity loss, protect ecosystem services and translate conservation commitments into action (Gittleman et al. 2026).

Tropical forests play a pivotal role in global carbon regulation. Across Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, forest degradation contributes substantially to greenhouse gas emissions. Peatland fires in Sumatra are a major emission source under prolonged dry conditions and unsustainable land-use practices (Hayasaka 2023). Conserving these forests is essential to achieving the Paris Agreement and supporting regional initiatives such as Indonesia's FOLU Net Sink 2030 Policy.

Interdependence of Tropical Forests and Community Well-being

There are deep and complex links between tropical forests in Southeast Asia and the region's environmental integrity and socio-economic stability. These forests store over 25% of the region's land-based carbon, influence monsoon patterns, help reduce flooding and landslides, and support millions of smallholder farmers through non-timber forest products like rattan, resin, honey and medicinal plants (Van Noordwijk et al. 2014; Ingram et al. 2014). Forest loss disproportionately affects marginalized and Indigenous communities. There is continuing tenure insecurity and limited involvement of Indigenous and local peoples in forest governance (Blanton et al. 2024). Expansion of oil palm plantations, mining and other land-intensive developments intensifies trade-offs between economic growth and conservation (Toumbourou & Dressler 2024). Strengthening community land rights, promoting community-based forest management and integrating Indigenous and local knowledge into decision-making can benefit both conservation and social equity (Zaenuddin, Purwoko & Sofjan 2025; Blanton et al. 2024; Panopio et al. 2021).

Without inclusive governance, these communities are at risk of livelihood insecurity, cultural marginalization and reduced resilience to climate change. Indigenous lands tend to experience less deforestation and degradation when land rights are secure and promote community stewardship (Sze et al. 2022a). Inclusive forest policies are critical for maintaining both forests and the communities that depend on them.

Policy Recommendations

A comprehensive, multi-tiered strategy is essential for safeguarding the tropical forests of Southeast Asia while fostering inclusive, climate-resilient ecosystems. The following recommendations are provided for ASEAN Member States, other regional stakeholders, civil society organizations and Indigenous communities.

1. Enhance forest governance through transboundary cooperation and legal harmonization.

Forest degradation frequently crosses national borders, necessitating coordinated regional responses to issues such as illegal timber trade, transboundary haze pollution and wildlife trafficking. ASEAN must advance legal alignment by establishing a binding regional framework to curtail deforestation and forest-related crimes. The ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution is an example of a promising legal model for regional cooperation (ASEAN 2002), although its effectiveness is limited while enforcement remains largely under national jurisdiction. Legal frameworks addressing deforestation and forest-related crimes remain fragmented as monitoring and assessment mechanisms between cross-border parties are yet to be established.

A regional forest governance platform should be established under the ASEAN Working Group on Forests and Climate Change. This platform should employ satellite monitoring systems such as SEPAL and SERVIR-Mekong (GLAD & SERVIR 2025) to track forest loss, consider hotspots of occurrence and support early warning systems in areas of potential degradation. The platform would also serve as a forum for coordinating enforcement actions between customs agencies, border security and forestry departments. Additionally, frameworks such as the ASEAN Forest Clearing House Mechanism should be augmented to promote data transparency, facilitate evidence-based policymaking and build trust between Member States. Strengthening regional governance must involve the formal recognition of customary land tenure, particularly for Indigenous communities, in legal and policy frameworks to ensure inclusive engagement and effective dispute resolution.

2. Ensure inclusive landscape-based forest management that integrates Indigenous knowledge.

Sustainable forest management must emphasize landscape-scale planning that incorporates biodiversity conservation, food security, carbon sequestration and cultural values. A participatory approach is essential, engaging local stakeholders, forest users and Indigenous communities in co-developing land-use strategies. The Forest Land Use Planning (FLUP) model in the Philippines, which integrates community-

driven zoning and resource mapping, is an example of how to enhance forest recovery and reduce tenure disputes (World Bank 2018). Securing tenure rights and broadening the rights-based co-management approach are crucial steps. This approach helps to incorporate Indigenous knowledge systems to support documentation initiatives, such as rotational agriculture, conservation of sacred groves and traditional forest calendars, empowering communities to actively participate in forest management and monitoring through culturally relevant practices. This could begin as an ASEAN initiative implemented through national forest policies, with a focus on capacity building and training to enhance community forest governance and leadership, particularly empowering women and youth.

Initiatives for forest landscape restoration, such as the Bonn Challenge and the Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) Initiative, must align with local priorities and biodiversity hotspots, particularly in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar, where forest loss persists because of agricultural expansion, dependence on forest resources and weak governance (Global Forest Watch 2026). Although REDD+, timber legality verification and commodity traceability are expanding, implementation remains inconsistent and often overlooks community land rights and livelihoods (Vijitharan, Tsusaka & Sasaki 2024). Better coordination between restoration programmes, REDD+, timber legality verification and traceability systems is essential to ensure that financial incentives support verified forest conservation, strengthen community land rights and promote inclusive forest management.

3. Develop participatory monitoring and evaluation systems for adaptive forest governance.

Structured and sustainable monitoring and evaluation systems are needed to support landscape-based forest management mechanisms. They rely on a participatory approach that emphasizes two-way communication, allowing for feedback through dialogue and suggestions. At the operational level, governments and implementing agencies may:

- i. Establish community-based monitoring systems that involve local stakeholders such as Indigenous peoples, women and youth in active roles.
- ii. Employ geospatial and digital technologies to enable real-time data collection and reporting on critical social and ecological indicators such as forest cover, biodiversity and deforestation.
- iii. Explicitly delineate institutional responsibilities for data management, monitoring and the prompt resolution of local issues.

- iv. Institute regular multi-stakeholder forums to review monitoring data and foster adaptive management through continuous, collaborative feedback.

This approach adapts to diverse situations and effectively recognizes the varying socio-ecological contexts across regions. Participatory monitoring and evaluation systems can help to systematically identify, document and integrate Indigenous knowledge into forest management processes, ensuring that management strategies remain grounded and adaptive in local environmental and cultural contexts.

4. Advance financing and incentive mechanisms for forest conservation through regional green funds.

Increased financing for sustainable forests is crucial to enable effective monitoring, enforcement and alternative livelihoods. ASEAN should promote the creation of a regional green financing entity, such as a Southeast Asian Forest Resilience Fund, to provide grants and concessional loans focused on forest conservation, restoration and carbon offset initiatives. Expanding payment for ecosystem services schemes in key forest regions can incentivize communities to play a role in maintaining essential ecosystem functions, including watershed protection and biodiversity preservation. Collaboration between national forestry agencies, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity and international initiatives like REDD+, the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the KMGBF can strengthen transparent forest financing. ASEAN countries should advocate for high-integrity jurisdictional REDD+ schemes that guarantee accountability, equitable benefit-sharing, and co-benefits for biodiversity, climate and livelihoods.

It is also critical to foster sustainable value chains for non-timber forest products (NTFPs). During the last decade commodity-driven activities have been the leading cause of deforestation in Southeast Asia (Global Forest Watch 2026). Certification schemes must be made more accessible, integrated and collectively implemented. National forestry authorities must enable the active involvement of local communities and smallholders, and provide technical guidance from forest research institutes, extension services, certification bodies and regional organizations such as the Regional Community Forestry Training Center for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC) and ASEAN. Financing options could be explored through the Southeast Asian Forest Resilience Fund, with strategic collaboration from partners such as the European Union. This inclusive approach will empower smallholders and Indigenous peoples to participate more effectively in sustainable commodity value chains.

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