

# Conservation in Plantations

## Sungai Segama Riparian Rehabilitation and Sekar Imej Conservation Area

Sabah is world-renowned for being among the most biologically rich landscapes, with lush forests and opulent marine ecosystems. It is home to many and unique species, including the orangutan and the Asian pygmy elephant. Hence, when Wilmar commenced its operations in Sabah in the early 1990s, there was an immediate realisation of the importance in retaining key forests and protecting wildlife. Wilmar, established in 1991, is a leading agribusiness company and the world's largest palm oil trader.

Wilmar has conservation areas set aside globally that totals to over 30,000 hectares – roughly the size of Penang Island. Hence, it is important that Wilmar has a conservation strategy in place to preserve biodiversity and the

environment. The case studies of the Sungai Segama Riparian Area and Sekar Imej Conservation Area (SICA) demonstrate that oil palm production and biodiversity can coexist.

### Breathing New Life: Rehabilitating the Sungai Segama Riparian Area

Rivers and streams are prominent features within Wilmar's plantations in Sabah. Riparian reserves are part of the 8,399 hectares of conservation areas within Wilmar's operations in Sabah and Sarawak. State regulations in Malaysia have clear requirements for riparian<sup>1</sup> buffers in forestry while best management practices for oil palm plantations on riparian areas

<sup>1</sup> Riparian areas are the interface between land with rivers or streams.

Other plantation  
company

Sabahmas planted area

Sabahmas estate/  
Wilmar's riparian area

Sabahmas Riparian reserves of 50m wide (right side of the river) which is part of the 8,399 hectares of conservation area within Wilmar's operation in Sabah.

emerged through certification standards such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO).

Initially, there was debate on feasibility and effectiveness of interventions to re-establish forest vegetation along riverbanks previously cleared for agriculture. Wilmar's General Manager of Sustainability at that time, Simon Siburat applied his knowledge as an experienced planter and a forestry graduate to spearhead the establishment of riparian conservation areas located within Wilmar's plantations. Active

operations ceased in demarcated riparian areas, including halting the application of chemicals and fertilizers. Rehabilitation through the planting of native tree seedlings was also introduced.

A partnership with the Sabah Forestry Department (SFD) resulted in approximately 68,000 tree seedlings from 19 native tree species being planted from 2009 to 2014 in the first of their riparian rehabilitation projects along Sungai Segama, which is located in Wilmar's Sabahmas state and adjacent to the Tabin Wildlife

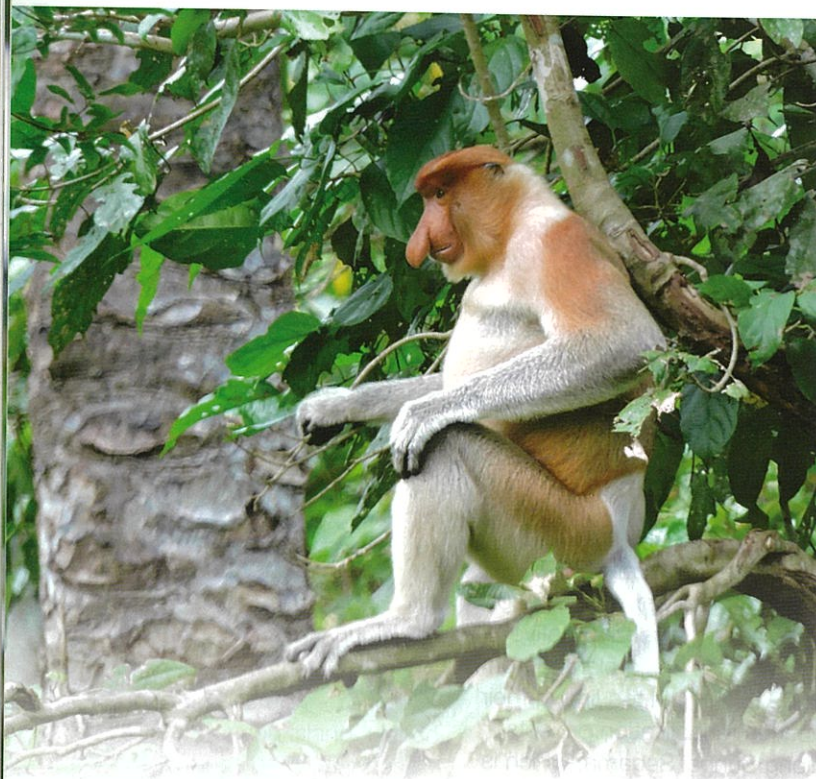


Sanctuary. The Sungai Segama riparian reserve, which is a 47km stretch, is now being widened from its original width of 20 meters to 50 meters, which increases the riparian area to 381 hectares from the initial 94 hectares.

The initiative to re-establish riparian areas along Sungai Segama proved to be successful. A decade since the initial restoration effort, the riparian area is now a wildlife habitat functioning as a corridor for various Rare, Threatened and Endangered (RTE) primate species, including the Silvered Langur (*Trachypithecus cristatus*) and the iconic Proboscis Monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*). Upon the completion of restoration efforts, the Primate Monitoring Project was initiated in 2015, together



The Sabahmas riparian area is a wildlife habitat for various Rare, Threatened and Endangered (RTE) primate species, including the Silvered Langur (*Trachypithecus cristatus*) (Top) and the iconic Proboscis Monkey (*Nasalis larvatus*), (Bottom).



with Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD) and HUTAN, which is an orangutan research NGO based in Sabah. Recent studies by HUTAN and the PONGO Alliance<sup>2</sup> indicate a pattern linking wildlife population stability to the riparian rehabilitation initiative along Sungai Segama. The population of the Silvered Langur has in fact increased, despite being sensitive to habitat degradation.

Building on the overall positive outcome from the Sungai Segama initiative, Wilmar replicated the riparian rehabilitation project along Sungai Sapapayau in its Sapi Estate. A 20-meter riparian zone was established alongside the river, amounting to an area of over 110

<sup>2</sup> PONGO Alliance is a collaboration between NGOs, oil palm growers and businesses to advocate and support the conservation of orangutans and other wildlife within oil palm landscapes. [www.pongoalliance.org](http://www.pongoalliance.org)

hectares with approximately 28,000 tree seedlings from 51 tree species being planted from 2014 to 2019.

### Retaining Forest Connectivity: The Sekar Imej Conservation Area

The Sekar Imej Conservation Area (SICA) is a picturesque forest landscape located within Wilmar's plantation boundaries in the Beluran district of Sabah. At 2,469 hectares, it is Wilmar's largest conservation area in Malaysia consisting largely of Lowland Mixed Dipterocarp Forest. The terrain is dissected and hilly, with steep slopes exceeding 25° angles. Given its hilly terrain, the conservation area is crucial for soil erosion control while providing clean water supply, habitats and refugia for mammals and birds.

To date, about 83 species of fauna have been recorded around SICA, many of which are listed as protected under the Sabah Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997 and the IUCN<sup>3</sup> Red List. Among the species of interest recorded include the Sunbear (*Helarctos malayanus*), Lesser Mousedeer (*Tragulus kanchil*), Bornean Yellow Muntjac (*Muntiacus atherodes*) and birds such as the Oriental Pied Hornbill (*Antheacoceros albirostris*), and the Great Argus (*Argusianus argus*).

The flora found in the area is a mix of secondary re-growth, low-density forest with pioneer and scrub vegetation, therefore providing various forest structures. Recorded species of interest under IUCN Red List include the Seraya (*Shorea sp.*), Seraya Majau (*Shorea johorensis*), Keruing (*Dipterocarpus sp.*),

<sup>3</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Kapur (*Dryobalanops beccarii*) and Kayu Gaharu (*Aquilaria microcarpa*), renowned for its resin in damar oil production.

Understanding that conservation requires the recognition and support from local communities, Wilmar engages closely with surrounding villages of Kampung Kinadaan, Kampung Mononod and Kampung Kaiboton. These communities are part of the long-term strategy for SICA, and are being actively trained to support conservation efforts. Wilmar also supports the communities by developing core infrastructure, such as the water gravity system that enables water to be piped to the villages.

SICA, as an ongoing joint effort between Wilmar and its stakeholders, was initiated to strengthen effective management of conservation areas for long-term biodiversity conservation in the plantation landscape. Further research needs to be conducted to better understand the landscape. Wilmar's aim is to establish SICA as a Biodiversity and Carbon Research Center by 2030 with official conservation status through OECMs<sup>4</sup> recognition.

In March 2020, Wilmar signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) on biodiversity conservation research projects, with SICA as a key priority area. The partnership capitalises on the strengths and expertise in life sciences by USM, and Wilmar's commitment to implement best practices in environmental sustainability.

<sup>4</sup> Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) is a specific programme under the IUCN.



### Collaborating for Conservation: Researchers, NGOs and Government

As part of its continuous effort to champion biodiversity and sustainability, Wilmar partners with NGOs such as HUTAN and PONGO Alliance, and conservation experts such as the South East Asia Rainforest Research Programme (SEARRP) to identify and implement sustainable landscape management in oil palm plantations and its surrounding areas to ensure they can coexist with wildlife, including the iconic orangutan.

Establishing research partnerships with academia is a key element of Wilmar's overall conservation strategy. Wilmar also collaborated with Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) since 2014 for biodiversity conservation in Sarawak.

Engaging relevant government agencies is another crucial component to conservation. Wilmar works closely with SFD, SWD and the Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC) to achieve shared goals in forest rehabilitation and wildlife protection. This includes conducting joint programmes focusing on awareness raising, education and enforcement such as the Wildlife Awareness Outreach Programme (WAOP) and as well as the Honorary Wildlife Wardens and Ranger programmes in Sabah and Sarawak.

Gerowong trail, one of the scenic trails in SICA with unique rock formations.

### Biodata:



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A trip to Puncak Laimong by the SICA team, led by Marcie Elene Marcus Jopony (first from left) and Chin Sing Yun (third from left, standing).



Dr Marc Ancrenaz (fourth from left) from HUTAN providing training to Wilmar's team on faunal survey



Tree nursery where native tree species were propagated for the riparian rehabilitation planting in the conservation area.



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