
This is a speech written for an executive at a large global paper company, where Sandra was head of US communications. The Company is based in Asia, but this executive is based in North America. The goal is to help North American industry and sustainability experts understand the perspective of Asian experts.

President Obama's visit last week to Indonesia has drawn world attention to this country of islands. A land with 240 million people, Indonesia is often maligned for a poor environmental record and a lack of interest in protecting its rainforest. However, the data tells a different story. Examples of this are the two environment certifications that APP, one of Indonesia's largest paper producers, received after painstaking audits from certification organizations based in the EU and the US.

It is interesting to postulate how much of Indonesia's image is based on a lack of knowledge in the west about Indonesia. NGOs possibly find it an easy target because of Indonesia's cultural disinclination to public confrontations and their struggles to balance the needs of the impoverished with the need to protect the environment.

In the 1800s, the U.S. faced a similar problem with a large population of impoverished people. Our solution was to offer free land to those who were willing to "open up the west." The huge influx of people into the "uncivilized" western states was considered a win-win for both the nation and its impoverished. Western expansion was actually considered to be an environmental positive because it "tamed the west," even though it felled thousands of acres of virgin land, gave the Mississippi its "muddy waters" nickname and later created the Dust Bowl.

Today we have higher expectations for other countries than we did for ourselves back then. The impact that we humans have had on the world is, and should be, a global concern. We westerners are cleaning up our environmental act and expect eastern countries to do the same. We pressure them to "go green" like us, but leave them on their own to figure out how to stop what the U.N. considers the root cause of their environmental damage – poverty.

To expect a country where 38 million people live in poverty – equivalent to the entire populations of Illinois and New York State - to solve their environmental issues without factoring in this poverty, is both naïve and unhelpful. Indonesians, who sometimes understand our own American history better than we do, can be naturally, albeit quietly, resentful of the double standard that we thoughtlessly impose upon others.

Also, our definition of "going green" assumes that Indonesia should be "green" according to our standards, without considering that our standards are based on a much colder climate. For example, we assume that trees are precious, because in chilly North America, they can take up to 60 years to grow. But in Indonesia, a tree can grow to full maturity in as little as six years. This is why Indonesians can consider, with some validity, a tree to be more like a crop than something to hug.

Indonesia is making great strides in balancing the world's need for paper, their own need for the paper industry to feed their population, and everyone's interest in protecting ancient rainforests. They prove this through strict government policies that only allow tree plantations on denuded or degraded land. In fact, one organization alone – APP and its suppliers – is in the process of reforesting 1.3 million hectares of degraded land and wasteland - an area about half the size of Massachusetts. While planting 1 million trees every day, APP also employs about 75,000 people in Indonesia– creating an economical ripple effect where 3 million people are able to survive because of it.

To protect what actually is precious - the rainforest and its flora and fauna - APP is working with the U.N. to create the 172,000-hectare Bukit Batu Biosphere Reserve conservation project in Riau Province, Sumatra. This U.N. “Man and the Biosphere” project was the first of its kind to be initiated by the private sector. APP has also created the 106,000 hectare Senepis Tiger Sanctuary, also in Riau.

Indonesians understand the difference between plantations and ancient rainforests. But they probably often wonder – do westerners understand this difference too?