

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN FIRE MANAGEMENT

# Communities in Flames

► By SAHLEE BUGNA

**D**isturbance and change caused by a variety of agents, including fire, have always been a natural occurrence in our environment, and have played a major role in modifying various ecosystems. Although not all fire is harmful, human-induced fires have since become a cause for concern. Every year, millions of hectares of the world's forests are consumed by fire, resulting in billions of dollars in suppression costs, biodiversity loss, displaced communities and wildlife, and lingering haze that continue to wreak havoc on ecological and human welfare to this day.

In Southeast Asia (SEA), the effects of forest fires have been just as devastating. In the past, forest fires were infrequent since the lush tropical rainforests grow under conditions of abundant rainfall and high humidity, making them less vulnerable. However, human interference and increased El Niño events have combined to increase the frequency of forest fires in SEA. Since 1982, there have been five major fire outbreaks, the most damaging of which occurred in 1997-1998, dubbed by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) as the 'Year When the World Caught Fire.' Fires raged across many SEA countries, destroying an estimated 9 million hectares of forest in Indonesia alone. These were largely attributed to land clearing for agriculture as well as an extended dry season brought about by El Niño.

Since then, regional governments have been meeting in various forums to discuss ways to address the effects of forest fires and haze. In 25-28 July this year, some 120 representatives



Photo by Anya Hoffman, Integrated Forest Fire Management project (IFFM/GTZ) Indonesia

from 21 countries met in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan in Indonesia in a conference entitled *Communities in Flames: International Conference on Community Involvement in Fire Management*. Project FireFight Southeast

**“Every year, millions of hectares of the world’s forests are consumed by fires, resulting in billions of dollars of suppression costs, biodiversity loss, displaced communities and wildlife, and lingering haze that continue to wreak havoc on ecological and human welfare to this day.”**

Asia, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and the Regional Community Forestry Training Center organized the conference with financial assistance from the European Union and the United States Development Agency (USDA) Forest Service. It took off from the December 2000 regional workshop on community based fire management (CBFiM) organized by Project Firefight Southeast Asia, and aimed to:

- Expose Forestry Departments and Fire Control Agencies to alternative approaches to forest management which promote the participation of local communities in planning and managing their own forest fire regimes;
- Examine the approaches and elements for promoting these alternatives to civil society; and
- Form working groups and formulate action plans that capture the opportunities that these alternatives offer.

The conference stressed two sides of the issue when it comes to forest fires. In some cases, fire is essential for forest regeneration; in others it destroys forests and results in serious adverse social and economic consequences. In most cases, local communities have been identified as the primary agents of damaging forest fires, whether they started them or not. This view tends to fog the

minds of local fire authorities and creates the perception that local communities are the problem, and not part of the solution in fire management. Papers presented in the conference, however, point out that local communities can and do manage fires in various situations and for many different reasons.

The conference further increased awareness in CBFiM, emphasizing that local people are often in the best position to manage or prevent fires. Indigenous knowledge provides varied information on community activities, native species, ecology of local forest types, resource use and positive or negative impacts of forest fires that should be applied when using or managing fires.

The presentations also showed that communities are more inclined to participate in fire management activities when social and economic incentives are present. A sense of ownership makes community participation infinitely more evident, and results in direct involvement. These were attested to by a variety of community-based approaches used in countries from Africa, Asia and Latin, South and Central America. The similarities between these different contexts should be drawn out to provide a better picture of how best to approach fire management at the local level.

While the conference provided a sound base for improved understanding of communities and their approaches to forest fires, it does not state that local people provide a complete solution to fire management. It simply emphasizes that local communities and other stakeholders, such as the government and the private sector, all play a substantial role in forest fire management.

Proceedings of the conference will be released later this year.

More information can be obtained from Dr. Peter Moore, Coordinator of Project FireFight Southeast Asia, at [pmoore@cgiar.org](mailto:pmoore@cgiar.org). ■

## Surfing the Web... of Life

**THE Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC)** <http://www.ruf.uni-freiburg.de/fireglobe/> monitors, forecasts and archives information on vegetation fires (forest fires, land-use fires, smoke pollution) at the global level. With this information, decision makers at national and international levels are supported in evaluating fire situations or precursors of fire that may endanger humans or negatively affect the environment. Established in 1998, the GFMC was designed as an information and monitoring facility, which national and international agencies involved in land-use planning, fire and other disaster management, scientists and policy makers can utilize for planning and decision making. The GFMC supports the design and implementation of fire management and research projects all over the world. One objective of the FIREGLOBE concept of GFMC is to transfer the wealth of scientific knowledge and technologies to the management level and to support development of national and regional fire policies.

**Centre for Remote Imaging, Sensing, and Processing (CRISP)**, Singapore <http://www.crisp.nus.edu.sg> offers a database with SPOT, ERS and Radarsat Images of the Southeast Asian (SEA) region covering the forest fire episode of 1997/98. It also provides a special feature on forest fires and haze in SEA.

**ASEAN Fire Weather Information System** <http://www.nofc.forestry.ca/fire/asean/>. This website of the Canadian Forest Service is of special interest for Southeast Asia; it features a prototype of the ASEAN Fire Weather Information System with the Canadian Fire Weather Indices for the region. The maps are provided on a day-to-day basis.

**ASEAN Haze Action Online** <http://www.haze-online.or.id>. In response to the fire and smoke episodes in Southeast Asia between 1982 and 1998, several national and international initiatives, especially in Indonesia were instituted, such as the Haze Technical Task Force (HTTF) organized during the Sixth Meeting of the ASEAN Senior Officials on Environment in September 1995. The HTTF finalized a response strategy - the Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP), which was completed in December 1997, and endorsed by the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Haze (AMMH) held in Singapore from 22 to 23 December 1997. The ASEAN Environment Ministers' requested assistance from the Asian Development Bank to make the RHAP fully operational. The Bank responded by approving the Regional Technical Assistance (RETA) 5778-REG (Strengthening the Capacity of ASEAN to Prevent and Mitigate Transboundary Atmospheric Pollution). One of the activities that came out of the RETA was the ASEAN Haze Action Online. This website also provides the following information and discussion platforms:

- Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP)

Document;

- Implementation of the RHAP;
- Monitoring: Hyperlinks to institutions involved in regional monitoring and prediction of fire and smoke haze;
- Haze News: Updates on haze situation, ASEAN press releases, press clippings from international, regional and sub-regional media;
- Calendar: ASEAN's fire-and-haze related events can be identified by a search modus;
- Intranet: Information and possible participation in the ASEAN Haze Action Online Intranet Information Services (coming in 2002);
- Haze Forum (coming in 2002): Communication platform on fire and smoke-haze issues in the ASEAN region.

**Forest Fire Prevention and Control Project (FFPCP)** <http://www.mdp.co.id/ffpcp.htm>. The FFPCP is a joint enterprise between the European Commission and the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry and Estate Crops. The website contains an overview of the activities of FFPCP, as well as coordinates of detected hotspots and fire danger rating.

**The Integrated Forest Fire Management (IFFM) Project** works with the Provincial Government of East Kalimantan to develop a province-wide fire management system to reduce the impacts of "unwanted" forest and land fires. By developing the necessary technical skills of Indonesian counterparts, providing firefighting equipment and a warehousing system, and working closely with Provincial and District governments, IFFM has the long-term goal of institutionalizing a fire management organization within the existing government structure.

The IFFM website <http://www.iffm.org> describes the major goals, objectives and activities of the IFFM Project's three units: Fire Prevention, Fire Operations and Fire Information.

The website features include:

- Inventory: Inventory and analysis;
- Fire Prevention - overview of fire causes and conflicts in East Kalimantan, six-step outline of Community Based Fire Management, and promotion of Si Pongi fire prevention mascot;
- Fire Operations - allocation of firefighting equipment, status of Local Fire Center construction, firefighter trainings, and recent fire suppression actions;
- Fire Information - background on 1997/98 fires, updates on NOAA/AVHRR Hotspots and Fire Danger Rating, and links to pertinent weather and El Nino forecasts;
- Portions available in both Indonesian and English languages;
- A listing of IFFM reports and other pertinent publications;
- Other links to related web pages.