

Indonesia third-largest greenhouse gas emitter

4:00AM Tuesday Oct 27, 2009

Lush tropical rainforest once covered almost all of Indonesia's 17,000 islands between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. And just half a century ago, 80 per cent remained.

Since then, rampant logging and burning have destroyed nearly half that cover and made the country the world's third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases after the US and China.

Indonesia still has one-tenth of the world's remaining rainforests, a treasure trove of rare plants and animal species, including critically endangered tigers, elephants and orang-utans. However, it is destroying its forests more quickly than any other country, according to the Guinness Book of Records, with an average two million hectares disappearing every year, double the annual loss in the 1980s.

It is that frenzied rate of deforestation that has propelled Indonesia, home to 237 million people, into its top-three spot in the global league table of climate change villains. According to a government report released last month, the destruction of forests and carbon-rich peatlands account for 80 per cent of the 2.3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emitted in the country annually.

The situation is partly a legacy of the 32-year rule of the dictator Suharto, during which the forests were regarded as a source of revenue to be exploited for economic gain.

Although the current Indonesian Government, under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, is committed to reducing deforestation and carbon dioxide emissions, not much has changed on the ground. Poor land management is compounded by lawlessness and corruption, and illegal logging is widespread.

According to one official estimate, the latter is responsible for the loss of 10 million hectares of forest.

Legal logging, too, is conducted at unsustainable levels, thanks to soaring demand from a rapidly expanding pulp and paper industry, in a country struggling with high levels of poverty.

The recent government report forecast that carbon emissions, which have risen from 1.6 billion tonnes in 1990, will increase to 3.6 billion by 2030, a leap of 57 per cent from today's level. The main reason is logging and clearing of forests for agriculture and industrial plantations, including oil palms.

Indonesia supports the UN's Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation initiative, welcoming the idea of being paid to conserve its forests.

However, some observers question whether the carbon credits it would receive will be priced

high enough to make the scheme worthwhile.

Indonesia accounts for 8 per cent of global carbon emissions, although the archipelago represents barely 1 per cent of the world's landmass.

It still has the third-largest tracts of tropical rainforest, after Brazil and the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite losing one-quarter of its forest cover between 1990 and 2005.

- INDEPENDENT