

New Colombo Plan Field School on Palm Oil and Sustainability in Indonesia

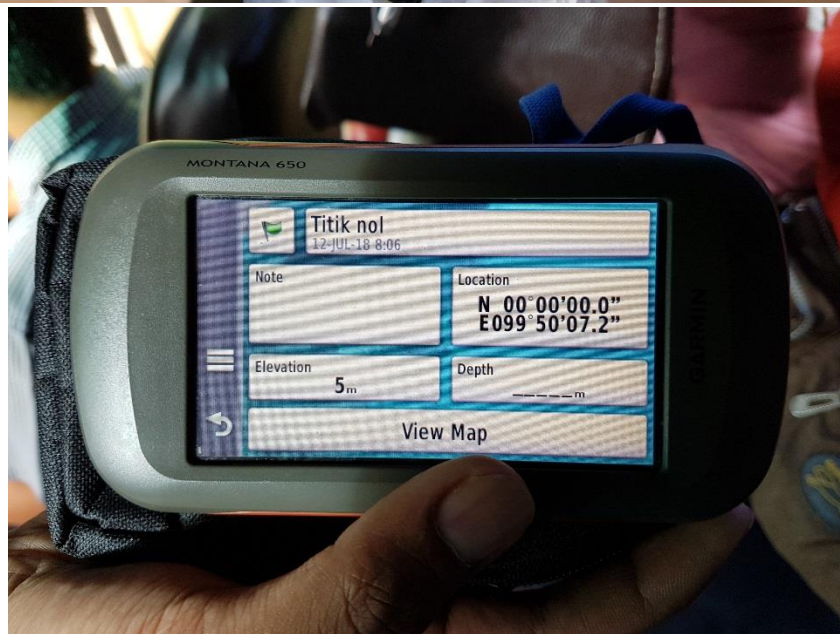
3rd-18th July 2018



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I thoroughly enjoyed my time learning in Indonesia. My overarching reflection is that the topic of environmental sustainability and agricultural practices, particularly surrounding the production of palm oil is a highly complex issue. The main issues seem to be that communication is lacking primarily between on the ground remote smallholders and governmental bodies. Whereby decision-makers are not interacting with communities and farmer are not receiving assistance or education from the government.

NCP Field School on Palm Oil and Sustainability in Indonesia Programme

Day 1: (3 July, Tue) Arrive in Jakarta.

Day 2: (4 July, Wed) Australian Embassy Jakarta, Green Peace Indonesia

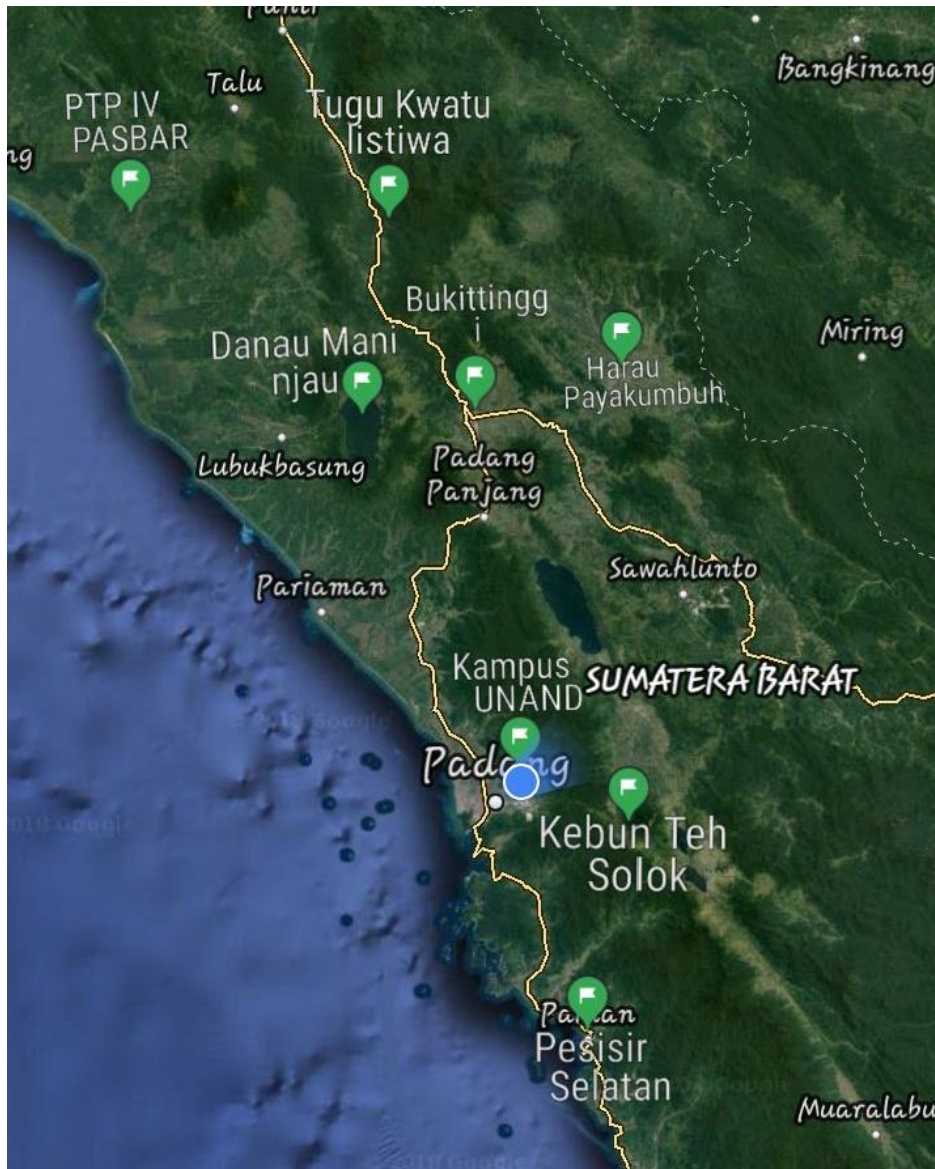
Day 3: (5 July, Thu) RSPO, and GAPKI, Indonesian Oil Palm Association

Day 4: (6 July, Fri) Bogor

Indonesian Centre for Agricultural Land Resources Research and Development (ICALRD),
Oil palm plantation in Cigudeg.

Day 5: (7 July) Saturday in Bogor

Day 6: (8 July, Sun), Jakarta to Padang



Day 7 : (9 July, Mon).

- 07.00 : To PTPN VI Tea Plantation, Mt. Talang (1.5 hr drive from Padang)
- 08.30 : Arrive PTPN VI Danau Kembar, Mt. Talang
- 08.45 : Volcanic soils support Tea Plantations, Activities in PTPN VI
- 13.00 : Lunch PTN VI
- 14.00 : To Danau Diateh dan Danau Dibawah
- 17.00 : To Padang

Day 8 : (10 July, Tue), Accommodation in Simpang Empat – Pasaman Barat

- 08.00 : Universitas Andalas, Kampus Limau Manis,
- 08.30 : Lectures – West Sumatra soils, agronomy, Plant Protection and Agribusiness
- 13.00 : Lunch
- 13.00 : Continue Lectures - West Sumatra soils, agronomy, Plant Protection and Agribusiness
- 16.00 : To Simpang Empat Pasaman Barat

Day 9: (11 July, Wed), Accommodation in Simpang Empat – Pasaman Barat

- 07.30 : To PTPN VI Oil Palm Plantation Luhak Nan Duo,
- 08.00 : Oil Palm Plantation in volcanic and peat soils
- 13.00 : Lunch
- 14.00 : Paddy in volcanic soils Mt. Talamau
- 19.30 : Dinner in Simpang Empat

Day 10: (12 July, Thu): Accommodation in Bukittinggi

- 07.30 : Visit the Equator 0°N, Peat area
- 11.00 : To Bukittinggi
- 13.00 : Explore Ngarai Sianok
- 19.00 : Dinner
- 20.00 : Discussion

Day 11: (13 July, Fri): Accommodation in Bukittinggi

- 07.30 : To Sariak-Sungai Pua
- 08.30 : Volcanic soils of Mt. Marapi support agriculture productions
- 13.00 : Lunch
- 14.00 : Pandai Sikek – Wood and Woven Crafts
- 17.00 : Green Wall Koto Gadang
- 19.30 : Dinner in Bukittinggi

Day 12: (14 July, Sat): Accommodation in Harau – 50 Kota

- 07.30 : To Harau Valley
- 09.00 : Explore Geopark Harau Valley
- 13.00 : Lunch Harau Valley
- 14.00 : Kelok Sambilan Bridges

Day 13: (15 July, Sun):

07.30 : To Politeknik Pertanian Negeri Payakumbuh,
08.00 : Cocoa seedling & processing
13.00 : Lunch

Day 14: (16 July, Mon):

08.30 : Geology of Maninjau Caldera
10.00 : Rice Field, Sugar cane processing
13.00 : Lunch
14.00 : Exploring Maninjau
17.00 : To Padang
19.00 : Lunch Sicincin
20.30 : Arrive Padang

Day 15: (17 July, Tue) Accommodation in Painan

07.30 : To Painan, South Coast of West Sumatra
09.00 : Explore Mandeh beach
19.30 : Dinner

Day 16: (18 July, Wed): Back to Padang, Finish





Our visit to the Australian embassy on the 4th of July encouraged us to start the trip with an overarching view of how we as not just individuals, but as Australian citizens were to approach the learning.

The visit provided valuable political, economic and developmental context. We learnt about Indonesia's wealth distribution, the prevalence of poverty, the country's social and economic development and how Australia's relationship with Indonesia has changed, shifting from a donor-recipient model to an advice and expertise-giving model.



Of particular note was the fragile state of the average Indonesian citizen's economic status – more than 10% of Indonesia's citizens live at or below the poverty line, and the average family unit tends to be highly dependent on the income of the male or father figure. In the context of an investigation into palm oil, this poses problems, as the international push for boycotting of the palm oil industry has the potential to cause the loss of many of the livelihoods of these primary providers, plunging small families below the poverty line once again.



Visiting the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) made me aware of how certification processes need to adapt to the complexity of the palm oil supply chain. I've realised there's a degree of compromise in certification, as it currently isn't feasible to universally ensure complete traceability of sustainable palm oil, resulting in the need for different supply chain models with different levels of certification.



It gave me an understanding of how the private sector and the government's mandate are at odds with NGOs and international perceptions of oil palm. ... they raised some interesting points regarding market protectionism and post colonialism. They proposed that the EU's concerns were rooted in protecting their own vegetable oil market, and that the EU and indeed the rest of the world were prohibiting the growth of Indonesia by condemning their use of natural resources, yet these countries hypocritically had been allowed the opportunity to do these same activities, just fifty years ago.



I can now see that different interests generate different perspectives; Greenpeace wants to prevent further deforestation, the RSPO wants more producers to become certified and GAPKI wants to increase production. This made we wonder how the future of the industry might be affected when these organisations are all pulling in different directions.

Each organisation presented the same industry in very different ways; their representatives criticised, praised, downplayed and highlighted different aspects of palm oil that aligned with their views. The only belief that all the organisations seemed to share was that palm oil is crucial for many Indonesians, however what sustainability means, and its importance was a key source of disagreement



Travelling to our first palm oil plantation was an eye-opening experience for two reasons. First, seeing the sheer size of the plantation and trees upon trees across a valley. Turning numbers into a reality. Secondly, however, when standing on the cool shade of the palm trees and seeing the relatively ideal agricultural system that is created, I became confused. Oil palm bear fruit all year long for up to 25 years, which in comparison to other agri-systems is good for soil, requires minimal disturbance later on and is the best value and lower risk for farmers compared to producing one annual cash crop.



it gave me a better appreciation of difficulties faced by West Sumatran farmers. As well as low prices and sensitivity to global markets, farmers did not have a representative body in their region, meaning their village lacked cohesion or an ability to put forward a united front to lobby for more assistance from the government, or face challenges. There was also a lack of education of how to best utilise land to grow the most desirable and high performing crops, including pesticide and fertiliser usage. Accessing this advice would be logistically too far to travel, or require the sacrifice of valuable farming time. I was in awe of their apparent resilience, cheerfulness and kindness despite these issues.



The chilli and carrot growers shared many similarities, and my observations conformed to my expectations of smallholder farms in a developing country. I found it impressive that they were able to grow enough produce to support their families on such a small amount of land, two hectares for the chilli grower and two fields for the carrot grower, especially because farming was their only source of income.



This was the first time I'd heard about the plasma and nucleus model, where smallholders make up the plasma surrounding the nucleus of a large state-owned plantation. This system seemed like an effective way to allow local people to own land and experience its benefits, instead of just working on the nucleus plantation, which creates a network of economic development.



Oil palm grown on peat soil is another major environment issue facing the industry. For plantations to grow in peat soil, the water must be drained first. This results in the accumulation of plant material to decompose, releasing large amount of green house gases (GHG) into the atmosphere. Even after being drained, the peat soil offers very minimal structural support, which eventually results in mature oil palms collapsing due to their own weight, reducing the productivity of the plantations. Currently the government has set a ban on creating any new plantations on peat soil 3 m or deeper.



Over the course of these two weeks, I've come to realise that the ability to criticise the sustainability of palm oil comes from a place of privilege; to have the purchasing power and education to select more 'ethical' goods is a choice many people don't have. I can now understand why, as a developing country, environmental preservation might not be Indonesia's first priority, especially when so many livelihoods are at stake.

I've also realised that it's much easier to criticise palm oil from afar; empathising with people who are dependent on palm oil has enabled me to appreciate the depth of its impact.



When comparing palm oil to other agricultural industries such as tea and rice, it is clear why the palm oil industry is so attractive to the average Indonesian and how the industry is a driver in reducing poverty rates, especially in rural areas. These areas have been transformed from rural areas to small towns with access to greater technology, healthcare and education with the introduction of the palm oil industry in their area.

If the family can survive during the initial and immature phase or obtain land with already mature and fruit producing oil palm, the palm oil industry provides a stable year around employment and extremely high income. As the oil palm is most productive for the first 25 years of its life span, this is translated into decades of stable income given that the demand for palm oil continues. With biomass constantly returned back to the soil through pruned leaves and empty bunches, the soil doesn't experience high levels of nutrient depletion.

The impacts of oil palm plantations are evident, however the answer is not to simply boycott the industry. Issues such as deforestation are driven by other industries and ultimately are regulated by the government. Better legal regulation and solving land ownership issues will pave the way for solving deforestation for the future.



The two weeks brought numerous, invaluable experiences that have given me a broader understanding of Indonesia and the complexity of palm oil management as a crucial resource. To read and hear about the millions of hectares that are dedicated to palm oil is one thing, it is another to stand at a processing plant and overlook a valley completely covered in oil palm.

Travelling to Indonesia and meeting the farmers first hand, shaking hands and sharing tea restructured the entire picture I had previously conceived of palm oil. The difficulty of the issue became someone's livelihood.



The trip gave me a better understanding of Indonesia as the nexus between agriculture, environment and the wellbeing of millions.

These experiences could be summarised into three key learnings:

An appreciation for the difficulty of multi-stakeholder, systemic issues and the role that each actor, including government, play with differing priorities.

Hearing and seeing first-hand the vastly different perspectives of important players in the industry.

The importance of cultural competence and to understand the language of the country you are building a relationship with.



Cultural competence and the importance of clear communication was something I assumed is important, however as the trip progressed, I came to appreciate how integral it is for international relations. As we saw the vast differences between Australia and Indonesia, you come to understand how our decision processes are influenced by a number of factors, including culture, religion, physical infrastructure and transport, economics and a mixture of values that are inherently different.



