



Responsible management of tropical peatlands: balancing competing demands on a fragile resource

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In 2010 the International Peatland Society published a strategy for responsible peatland management, with the following guiding principles: (i) ensure that high conservation value peatlands are identified and conserved, (ii) manage 'utilised' peatlands responsibly, and (iii) rehabilitate or restore drained, degraded or otherwise irreversibly changed peatlands to restore as many ecological and landscape functions as possible. At the time of its publication, the main focus of the strategy was on northern peatlands, although a few partner organisations in SE Asia were involved in the strategy consultation process. Given the rapid rate of peatland development in SE Asia in the last 7 years and the growing interest in tropical peatland rehabilitation and restoration, we believe that it is now timely to review what a strategy for responsible tropical peatland management might look like. SE Asia's peatlands cover 250,000 km² of the region and store ~69 Gt C but they are subject to continuing deforestation, biodiversity loss, land subsidence/flooding, increasing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and health impacts due to air pollution from land-clearing fires, all of which pose huge regional and global challenges. Around 75% of the peatlands have been deforested in the last 20 years, with ~35% of cleared land now under industrial plantation, 34% under smallholder cultivation, and 25% unutilised, largely as a result of uncontrolled land-clearing fires. The production intensity (GHG emissions per calorie produced) of crops grown on SE Asian organic soils is among the highest in the world (Carlson et al. 2016). There are clear tensions between reconciling peatland management for conservation goals (of biodiversity, carbon and natural resources) with economic and livelihood development goals. A balance needs to be struck between the absolute value and distribution of short term economic gains vs. peatland management strategies that deliver longer-term, sustainable and shared environmental, economic and wider development goals. This presentation will explore what opportunities might exist for balancing these competing demands in support of long-term ecosystem and livelihoods resilience.