

# Protecting Tigers with A Fatwa: Lesson Learn Faith Base Approach for Conservation

Fachruddin Majeri Mangunjaya<sup>1,2</sup>, Chantal Elkin<sup>3</sup>, Gugah Praharawati<sup>2</sup>, Imran S L. Tobing<sup>4</sup>,  
Yeremiah R. Tjamin<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Graduate Program, Universitas Nasional, Menara UNAS, Jalan RM Harsono, Ragunan Ps Minggu, Jakarta 12550, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup>Center for Islamic Studies, Universitas Nasional, Jl Sawo Manila, Pejaten Ps Minggu, Jakarta 12520, Indonesia

<sup>3</sup>Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), 6-Gay Street, Bath, BA1 2PH, United Kingdom

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Biology Universitas Nasional, Jl Sawo Manila, Pejaten Ps Minggu, Jakarta 12520, Indonesia

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has lost two sub-species of tigers, in Java and Bali, and has approximately 500 remaining in Sumatra: 400 in 5 national parks and 2 game reserves and about 100 living outside protected areas (Seidensticker *et al.*, 1999). In 2007, the authors of the "Strategy and action plan for the conservation of the Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*): 2007-2017" estimated that a minimum of 250 adult tigers were living in 8 of the 18 tiger habitats across Sumatra (Indonesian Ministry of Forestry, 2007). Several key factors that have contributed to the decline of Sumatran tiger populations, including: forest habitat fragmentation and loss, direct killing of tigers and their prey, and the retaliatory killing of tigers due to conflict with villagers (Wibisono and Pusparini, 2010).

However poaching is one of the greatest threats to the now critically endangered Sumatran tiger, along with habitat destruction mainly for plantations. TRAFFIC has documented the highly destructive nature of the illegal trade of Sumatran tigers and consumption of tiger parts and products both in Indonesia and elsewhere in Asia (Ng & Namora, 2007).

The national tiger action plan of Indonesia states a need for conservation education "for all citizens of all ages" throughout Indonesia in order to help save the tiger (Priority iv). Priority III also discusses the need to address local attitudes towards tiger conservation to resolve human-tiger conflict. The Global Tiger Recovery Program (GTRP), launched in 2010, reiterates these priorities. The GTRP's mission is to double tiger numbers by 2022 and to protect 1.2 million hectares of tiger habitat. One of its main goals is to significantly increase awareness about the crisis facing tigers by 2015, particularly among indigenous and local communities, as knowledge about the tiger crisis as of 2010 was found to be woefully low (World Bank, 2011).

This project will contribute to the goals of the GTRP and Indonesia's national action plan by working with influential Muslim leaders in Jakarta and Sumatra to raise awareness among their vast faith communities about the need to protect tigers.

This project was conducted by Center for Islamic Studies at Universitas Nasional (UNAS), an academic

institution which focuses on contemporary studies on latest challenge to Islam particularly on Islamic view on environment, conservation and climate change. We were working in partnership with Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) a unique non-profit organization that has been working with the world's 11 major religions on environmental programmes for almost 20 years. A primary focus species of this project is tigers, which teeter on the edge of extinction, and act as flagships for the protection of other threatened species.

The tiger shares a threatened landscape with some of the world's major religions, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Daoism, whose followers number in the billions. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim nation, with 88% of the population following Islam, and Muslim leaders are viewed as trusted figures of moral and spiritual authority. Working with faith leaders to reach out to their communities through the teachings of the Koran will complement ongoing law enforcement, habitat protection and community outreach programs by striking at the heart of Indonesian Muslim's spiritual and moral value system. Those who may not respond to formal law enforcement may listen to the spiritual teachings that emphasize harmony in nature and respect for all living beings.

ARC has been working successfully with Muslim leaders in Indonesia since 2001, when we began partnering with the World Bank and Conservation International on a variety of programs (Mangunjaya, 2011; Mangunjaya & McKay, 2012). In collaboration with the Ministry of Forests and the Muslim Union we have produced educational resources on nature conservation and Islam for communities in and around KerinciSeblat National Park. We have also supported work with the *pesantrens* (Muslim boarding schools) on environmental education, and conservation activities in Java. Under an ARC/ UNDP initiative, Indonesian Muslims have been major partners in developing the Muslim 7 Year Plan on Climate Change (ARC, 2009).

Along the years, the faith base approach for conservation has been running in Indonesia. E.g though Faith and Environment and also Conservation International Indonesia's work with the Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren) (World Bank, 2005; Conservation

International 2007). The Darwin Initiative through FFI, CI, IFEES and others is one of the only faith-based programs focusing on forest management and community conservation in Indonesia. Surveys in Western Sumatra demonstrated a rise in understanding of ecosystem services among religious leaders and teachers from 50% to 92% and about Islamic systems for natural resource management from 0% to 100%, including some initiative involving Muslim leaders in Mingkabau Customary System (McKay, 2010; McKay, 2013). The success of these past programs demonstrates the power of working with religious leaders, but it has not been explored to any large degree for tiger and wildlife conservation. Many examples exist, however, of successful faith-led wildlife conservation initiatives. Chinese Daoists and Mongolian Buddhists, for instance, have enacted bans on hunting and on the use of threatened species in traditional medicines. After a declaration by the Dalai Lama in 2005 that killing endangered species goes against the tenets of Buddhism, Tibetans stopped using tiger skins for ceremonial dress almost overnight. In Cambodia, Buddhist leaders are ordaining trees and linking Buddha's life to the forest as ways to protect large areas of forests and the wildlife they shelter. There is an enormous opportunity to amplify these successes and bring faith and conservation worlds together to protect Asia's threatened species. and also to a 2011 USAID white paper "*From Practice to Policy to Practice: Connecting Faith and Conservation in Africa*" supporting such approaches in Africa (Gambriel, 2011).

### The Wildlife Fatwa

At the end of January 2014, Indonesia's powerful Islamic council of scholars, the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), announced the first ever 'biodiversity fatwa' (edict). The fatwa highlights the core principles, beliefs and texts in Islam that relate to conservation and asks all Muslims to safeguard biodiversity, particularly threatened species like the tiger and rhino. This edict represents an enormous shift in how Quranic teachings relate to the natural world: from now on there is no doubt that conservation principles are embedded within Islam.

The purpose of this project was to bring together Muslim leaders and conservationists in Indonesia to raise awareness about the plight of the Sumatran tiger and to help catalyze a Muslim response. As a result of this project, Indonesia's powerful Islamic council, the MUI, announced the first ever '*biodiversity fatwa*' (edict) in January 2014. The fatwa highlights the core principles, beliefs and texts in Islam that relate to conservation and outlines ways that Muslims from all walks of life can safeguard biodiversity, particularly threatened species like the tiger. The edict represents an enormous shift in how Quranic teachings relate to the natural world, clearly embedding conservation principles within Islam. The USFWS grant provided critical support, enabling ARC and our Indonesian partners at the Center for Islamic Studies at the National University (UNAS) to:

1. Bring together, for the first time, influential religious clerics, representatives from Indonesia's Forest and Environment Ministry, and conservation NGOs in a dialogue on Islam and conservation, through a series of meetings, consultations and field trips;
2. Hold a national meeting in Jakarta with 100 participants in November 2014 to discuss ways to spread awareness of the fatwa in priority tiger conservation areas; and
3. Begin dissemination of the fatwa text to clerics and communities living near conservation sites. This initiative brought together religious groups and conservationists in powerful partnerships that are continuing beyond the life of the project.

While not legally binding in Indonesian secular law, the fatwa is firmly based on Islamic law and tradition and is binding within that context. It explains how wildlife protection is important to Islam's core beliefs and values, and cites relevant verses of the Qur'an. The fatwa comes out strongly against harming, poaching and illegally trading tigers and other threatened wildlife (calling it *haram*, prohibited), and has specific guidelines for lawmakers, businesses, government, religious leaders and local communities for the protection of biodiversity. It calls on religious leaders to spread awareness in their communities about the need in Islam to protect threatened species and their environments.

The significance of this fatwa cannot be overstated. For the first time Indonesia's Muslim leaderships giving strong guidance to the country's Muslim population—the vast majority of Indonesia—to protect threatened species like the tiger as part of their religious duty. There is enormous potential for this approach to shift attitudes and behaviours in favour of conservation, particularly amongst communities living near important conservation sites who look to their religious leaders for moral guidance.

### The success story

The wildlife fatwa approximately hit by 263,000 results on Google and 21,200 results were found for the fatwa in Bahasa. In addition to this media coverage, information on the fatwa can be found on ARC, UNAS, MUI and WWF websites. We also measured whether, as a result of the fatwa trainings of religious leaders, participants had a deeper knowledge about: the ways Islamic principles support conservation, priority conservation issues, and ways to integrate conservation messages into sermons and educational activities.

UNAS researchers and students conducted pre and post training questionnaires with all training participants. We found that after the trainings, 96% of them agreed that the Quran teaches the importance of nature conservation, and that humans are the guardians of nature and have an obligation to protect it, versus 50% before the training. The participants felt the training widened their knowledge of and perspectives around conservation issues, threatened species and how humans

and nature are interconnected, as their knowledge about conservation had been limited. They became more aware of the ways they can be involved in conservation and live more harmoniously with nature. They appreciated teachings on ecosystem balance and natural resource management, and understood how they are rooted in Islamic principles. The clerics also felt the value of connecting with other clerics on this theme.

Most participants felt the MUI had done a great service by issuing the fatwa and felt that it will definitely increase the awareness of and involvement of the Muslim community in protecting the environment and its rare species. The participants endorsed the fatwa and expressed a desire to implement it and to spread its teachings broadly within their communities. They pledged to disseminate the guidelines of the fatwa through their sermons, community groups, educational activities and outreach, to over 20,000 people. As a result, we feel that our training has been important in shifting the attitudes of key religious and community leaders towards conservation by increasing their understanding of the fatwa.

Here is an example of results from the pre and post training questionnaires with training participants, which were similar after all four trainings:

- Before the training, 29% knew about the edict versus 88% after the training;
- After the training, 72% of participants felt the training was valuable and resulted in a new understanding of conservation;
- After the training, 76% of participants said the training inspired them to take environmental action;
- After the training, 80% believed the fatwa is one of the best approaches for environmental awareness among Muslims

Although only two rangers participated in our trainings, they gave us good feedback and felt the fatwa was an effective tool both for motivating themselves in their work, and as a valuable resource to use in their engagement with local communities. We shared posters and other educational materials with the officers to disseminate in local communities. It also became clear to us that involving enforcement officers in future trainings would be useful as a way to support them in their own work and to inspire the villagers they encounter.

WWF (2017) conducted a KAP (Knowledge, Attitude and Practices) assessment in 19 villages around Ujung Kulon that demonstrated a high level of awareness in these communities about the fatwa. The surveys were conducted in the Sumur and Cimanggu sub-districts to understand better local community attitudes and behaviours related to conservation of the park and its rhinos. A comparison survey was also done in one urban community in Pandeglang. The surveys included two questions related to the fatwa. Based on a sample of 600 respondents they found that 76% of respondents knew about the fatwa and that almost 70% had learned about the fatwa from their religious leaders, followed by tv and then internet. Our team conducted fatwa dissemination in 2014 and intensive training for the clerics in Ujung Kulon in 2016 (Fig 1). Another interesting finding from our surveys was that there appears to be a relatively strong

existing sense among Muslim villagers that Islam speaks to the importance of safeguarding nature. Our feedback suggests, however, that learning about the fatwa has strengthened and clarified this belief and increased their knowledge of how conservation concepts are linked to Islamic teachings.



**Figure 1.** Clerics conservation training participant in Ujung Kulon (2016).

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