



SUSTAINABILITY STORIES

Forests of the Future: Achieving Conservation Through Recreation

In the cradle of the rainforest, nature performs in polyphony. Buzzing, trilling insects band together with leaves that rustle and twigs that creak in the wind. Birds from their hidden perches pierce this droning veil with their cadenced whistles. Presiding over them all, serene and sonorous at once, is the voice of water. Crashing onto rocks, breaking into spatters before reuniting in flow, rippling as it gathers into a stream. One needs only to close one's eyes to feel the forest vibrate, and let its gift of rest take hold.

Nibung Lestari Cascades, tucked among the hills of Dusun Sebuak, is a recent addition to the (still rather modest) list of tourist sites in Ketapang Regency. Before acquiring its new name in 2022, the waterfall was known only to locals,

who simply referred to it by the neighbouring village. Its current name honours the nibung palm (*Oncosperma tigillarium*), a relative of the coconut whose trunk is armoured in thorns.

“In the days of our ancestors, those palms were all around,” says Marsila, chair of the KUPS (*Kelompok Usaha Perhutanan Sosial*—Social Forestry Business Collective) Nibung Lestari, which manages the waterfall area as an agro-ecotourism destination. “Legend has it one of the fruits fell with such force it dented the rock beneath. From that dent emerged a spring—one that feeds today's waterfall.”



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canopy. They consumed everything. Centuries-old trees, all gone to ash. In one sweep, this place became a wasteland.”

Marsila recalls the tears that overcame her at the time. She grieved for all that was lost. But out of those tears, a seed was planted in her mind. She made a vow to herself, never to let such devastation happen again. But back then she already knew, lecturing people to stop burning land was futile. She needed them to be cooperative. And people become cooperative when they feel a shared sense of belonging—when they are invited, not shut out.

Marsila’s thinking resonates with what Bumitama has long championed in its conservation projects. Preserving high conservation value (HCV) and high carbon stock (HCS) zones—which cover over 11 thousand hectares around company concessions in Ketapang—will be enduring when communities are placed at the centre. For Bumitama and its longtime partner IDH, social inclusion is non-negotiable. By improving livelihoods alongside protecting ecosystems, the company secures farmers’ commitment, and more importantly, earns their trust.

Nibung Lestari came into being out of necessity, to protect the forest ecosystem from encroachment by opportunistic farming, explains Marsila. The surrounding land had been designated ‘hutan desa’, which allows communities to draw value from it, though not by felling timber or conversion to oil palm.

A prominent community figure due to her outspoken zeal for forest protection, Marsila had been nurturing the idea to develop the site since as early as 2017. “I’ve known this place all my life. And I’ve always believed it has immense potential—if only we could find the means and the know-how,” she says.

“Our main goal is to preserve the ecosystem around Nibung Lestari,” she insists. “Because, look around, can you find truly old, ancient trees here?” she asks. There are none. Some of the trees—petai, pulai, mahang—rise overhead, but none of them suggest a pristine, primary forest. Rather, it is one in the throes of regrowth.

“In 2005, a massive fire burned through the entire forest here,” Marsila looks away, trying not to appear distraught by a nightmarish memory that has taken hold of her anew. Her eyes turn glassy. She continues, her voice quavering, “The flames tore through the

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One such farmer working under this scheme is Yogi, from Tanah Merah in the village of Sungai Kelik. “I have two hectares of land in an HCV area, as it lies in a riparian zone,” he explains. “I’ve planted it with guava, longans, bananas, along with petai and jengkol.”

Yogi has chosen these fruit plants over oil palms, whose planting and replanting demand greater capital. He also knows that palm fruits harvested from plantations in HCV/HCS zones cannot be legally sold to mills. Backed by Bumitama and IDH, he has received seeds, fertilisers, and training. Bumitama has even sponsored him to visit Java and Sumatra to refine his horticultural skills.



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“I plan to add durian and mango to my plot,” Yogi reveals. “They fetch good prices in the market. I want to show my friends here that fruit-bearing trees can be a better choice.” He spends time talking with fellow villagers, exchanging ideas about farming while stressing the importance of conserving forests and respecting HCV/HCS areas. He often participates in HCV/HCS patrols organised by the company and the community.

“I’ve told them many times: it’s not the end of the world if your land falls within an HCV,” Yogi says. “It can still be productive, like mine. If they see my harvest succeed, perhaps they will be convinced.”

Marsila’s vision, meanwhile, began to take shape in 2022. That year, Bumitama approached LPHD Rimbak Sangiang—the body managing the surrounding village forest—with an offer of support to lift the value of the HCV-designated site, for both the land and its people. Marsila put forth her plan: utilise the waterfall as a pivot point. If people saw it as a place for recreation, she argued, they would be compelled to preserve it.

Once the idea was greenlit, she and her KUPS colleagues rallied some 20 village youths. They carved a footpath and laid a trekking trail linking the waterfall to its headwaters. Bumitama and IDH funded the construction of a gazebo, ticket booth, restrooms, and a small service area. Within months, Nibung Lestari Cascades Agrotourism opened to the public.

Social media quickly boosted the waterfall’s profile. Initially drawing only those nearby, news of the brand-new destination spread to reach other districts and regencies. Visitor footprint swelled on weekends. Ade Pratama, a youth from Ketapang, first heard about the waterfall from his friends.

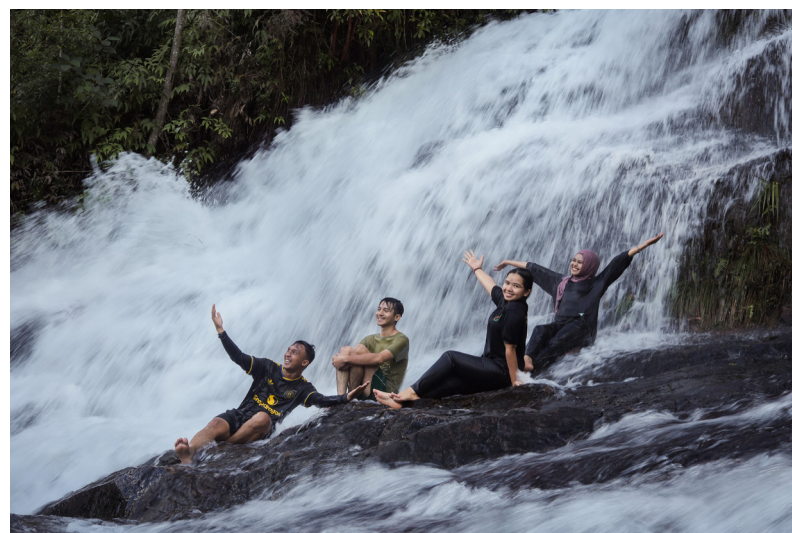
“I love it here, been here twice now. It’s taller than other waterfalls around Ketapang. The view is glorious, the air cool,” he says. “I’ll bring my friends next time—they’d love taking photos here.”

Despite patchy staffing—many of the youths had school or work commitments, others’ enthusiasm simply tapered off—the cascades generated 95 million rupiah in ticket sales between April 2024 and June 2025. Part of the proceeds went to support local cultural and community events.

Limited labour also has left the grounds looking untidy, with litter in several spots. “It would be nice to have more bins,” Ade observes.

Marsila takes his comments to heart. To her, the site is far from finished.

“After all, we call it ‘agrotourism,’” she says. “Our dream is to eventually set up an orchard here, with a variety of fruits visitors can pick, weigh, and pay for, to eat on the spot or take home. To get there, much work still lies ahead.”



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