

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/environment/conservation/taking-on-an-elephantine-task/2008/10/28/1224956039745.html>

Taking on an elephantine task

A campaign to have thousands of abandoned wells in a Sumatran national park filled in is achieving results, writes Russell Eldridge.



Precarious ... Sakura, a three-year-old elephant, supported in a sling after she was pulled from an abandoned well in Sumatra.

Photo: *Dr Andriansyah Suhaery*

ECO readers may recall the [sad story of the baby elephant Sakura](#), who died after being rescued from an abandoned well in Sumatra. Well, there is good news on the project to close these wells.

Our previous story in June reported on a \$60,000 fund-raiser being co-ordinated by a Byron Bay veterinarian, Claire Oelrichs. Working through the Indonesia International Rural and Agriculture Development Foundation and the privately run Ecolodges Indonesia, Oelrichs is

campaigning to close an estimated 4000 wells in Way Kambas National Park in south-eastern Sumatra.

The wells were left behind when eight villages were relocated in 1984 to make way for the 130,000-hectare park. Tropical regrowth has hidden the opening of the wells, turning them into deathtraps for a variety of animals, included critically endangered tigers, elephants and rhinoceroses.

After the June story Oelrichs was flooded with offers of support. The fund has now reached \$55,000.

This money, combined with a separate effort by a Japanese donor, is funding four teams of Indonesian workers, who have already filled in 1700 wells. The 10-man teams are working under the supervision of an Indonesian national parks officer, Sukatmoko.

The teams enter the forests for 10 days at a time in a search-and-fill mission in the dense regrowth. The task is becomingly increasingly difficult as the most accessible wells are eliminated.

Oelrichs's biggest coup was gaining a funding commitment from a powerful United States environmental organisation. An announcement is expected soon. The growing international publicity about the project has highlighted that it is an Indonesia-wide problem.

The Indonesian national parks system has only been created recently. Charged with the care of valuable land and some of the world's most fascinating and rare wildlife, the system is struggling with management and funding issues. The first five parks were proclaimed in 1980. Since then, more than 40 have been created, often dislodging thousands of villagers.

The system is struggling under a load of competing interests, including logging, mining, hunting, agriculture and, the biggest threat of all, clearing for palm oil production.

Wildlife experts predict that Indonesia's wild orang-utans, tigers, elephants and rhinoceroses could be extinct within decades.

Indonesians themselves are showing a pride and affection for their native wildlife, as evidenced by the extraordinary compassion shown by villagers in rescuing trapped animals.

One good news story revealed recently was the rescue of a baby elephant by Labuhan Ratu villagers. Wild elephants are raiding crops and destroying the villagers' livelihood. Yet when a six-month-old elephant became trapped in a dried pond after a raid, the villagers rushed to rescue her.

They hauled out the little elephant, which was given a medical check and successfully returned to her mother in the nearby forest by the elephant veterinary-rescue team from Way Kambas.

Ecolodges Indonesia and the Well Project is tapping into this goodwill and compassion by employing these same villagers to find and fill the abandoned wells.

Funds for the well-filling project are administered by the Indonesia International Rural and Agriculture Development Foundation, which is registered with the Indonesian Government. Donated money is paid directly to Sukatmoko and the local work teams through the management of the Satwa Sumatra Elephant Eco Lodge. **Contact Claire Oelrichs at highnoon@breakofday.com.au.**

Tourism with a conscience

ECOLOGDGES Indonesia was established to support conservation and communities through ecotourism ventures.

The organisation has several lodges that are managed and staffed by local people. The lodges provide comfortable accommodation while ensuring a minimal ecological footprint. They are a base for guests to explore, experience and interact with wildlife, natural environments and communities while directly contributing to the conservation of these areas.

Ecolodges Indonesia has been operating since 1996 and has four lodges:

- Rimba Orangutan Ecolodge in Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo);
- Satwa Sumatra Elephant Ecolodge in Lampung (Sumatra);
- Bajo Komodo Ecolodge on the island of Flores;
- Udayana Ecolodge in Bali.

Ecolodges Indonesia works with local communities, national parks, NGOs and others.



www.ecolodgesindonesia.com