

A man in camouflage clothing is kneeling in a field of tall grass, holding a smartphone to take a photo of a plant. He has a tan bag slung over his shoulder. The background is filled with dense green vegetation.

# VISUAL VOICES

CHANGES IN NATURAL RESOURCES  
IN ACEH REVEALED THROUGH THE  
LENS OF LOCAL PEOPLE

# FOREWORD

A picture is worth a thousand words. Pictures can tell stories that would have remained untold otherwise, particularly those of local community members. The PhotoVoice methodology is designed to amplify these voices. Through the lens of a camera, people get the opportunity to reveal their important, yet undiscovered stories. For themselves and for the wider public.

A few years ago, PhotoVoice was first introduced in Kalimantan, Indonesia, under the name of PandaClick!. In April 2019, WWF Indonesia organised a three-day PandaClick! workshop in the province of Aceh as part of the international partnership programme 'Shared Resource, Joint Solutions' (SRJS). In this collaboration WWF Netherlands, IUCN NL and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs aim to reinforce the voices of local civil society organisations (CSOs) and local populations. Thirty people from twelve CSOs and community members out of nine villages participated in the workshop. They learned about the power of pictures and the stories behind them, as well as the importance of sharing precious knowledge and values that are present in the community.

By analysing a wealth of pictures made by other environmental photographers, the participants improved their visual literacy. They showed their acquired skills in a field work setting. At the end of the workshop they were asked to capture images related to the abundance of biodiversity, critical issues threatening the sustainability of the existing ecosystem, and changes in the behaviour and attitude of social actors in protecting biodiversity.

This booklet shows the results of nine months of gathering pictures in the Peusangan, Jambo Aye and Tamiang watersheds in the Northern Aceh province. It gains insight into the environment and the changes in natural resources through the eyes of a selected group of Aceh people. When you look at this small selection out of over 300 incredibly beautiful pictures, you get the opportunity to listen to their voices and appreciate their perspectives. Their wish and hope is to inspire you to act - in whatever way you can - to help protect their landscape!

# INTRODUCTION

Aceh is the westernmost province of Indonesia. Its geographic position supports extremely rich biodiversity and cultures. The region is home to Sumatran elephants, tigers, rhinos and orangutans. The people of Aceh view these four wildlife species as their ancestral heritage. Especially elephants have had a vital role in supporting the kingdom of Aceh throughout centuries.

Located at the east coast of the province, the Peusangan, Jambo Aye and Tamiang watersheds have an abundance of natural resources. They are key in sustaining the livelihoods of local communities living in these areas. Half of the area of the watersheds consist of forests, where the four key species still co-exist in the wild.

Sadly, the forests, rivers and wildlife in these watersheds are under pressure. Nature is being threatened by illegal logging, poaching, mining, sand and gravel extraction, palm oil plantations and infrastructure development. Local people residing near forests and rivers usually do not have another choice than to work for companies engaged in such activities. Sustaining their families is priority and due to their low economic status working for such businesses often is the only option. People cut down timber, hunt elephants, extract sand and gravel or work on palm oil plantations to earn a little money.

As a result of weak law enforcement, lack of awareness and gaps in regulations, part of the original forest in the three watersheds was destroyed and the remaining forest degraded. Almost on a daily basis human-elephant conflicts are occurring. More than 10 elephants die every year, mostly due to these conflicts. There are only 539 elephants left.

In the international partnership programme Shared Resources Joint Solutions (SRJS), WWF works together with local communities and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to improve the current situation by protecting the biodiversity in their villages. Through their unique yet strong local wisdom, the people now work hand in hand with the government and private sector businesses to ensure fresh water supply and food security. With all forces bound together, the villages of local communities are being made climate resilient while embracing the importance of intact biodiversity.

Today, local communities carry out customary regulations to protect wildlife and their own livelihoods. Community-based patrol groups are available to overcome human-elephant conflicts, forests are restored, private sectors are willing to pay for environmental services, three palm oil plantations are implementing sustainable principles and the Aceh government is developing an integrated scheme to reduce human-elephant conflicts and protect wildlife in Peusangan.

In this booklet, CSOs and community members show the battles they go through in their villages every day and at the same time their privilege of living closely with wildlife. They believe that only with everyone's attention decision-makers can be influenced to look closer at the region and develop regulations or policies that can truly be solutions. With public pressure, they seek commitments of businesses to protect biodiversity. Local communities and CSOs can together protect the watersheds and ensure a sustainable livelihood for the people.

# WILDLIFE

A group of wild Sumatran elephants are tracked via a drone in the area of a community plantation. They are part of a bigger group of around sixty elephants in the pocket of the Peusangan riverbasin. Aceh has more than 500 elephants.

© Mahmud Yani – December 2017, Musara Pakat village, Pintu Rime Gayo, Bener Meriah



In August 2019, a wild elephant wanders into a village and destroys a community shelter. In this area, local people are extremely vulnerable to human- elephant conflicts. They experience damage and loss of property, sometimes even risking their lives.

© Wido Iskandar – July 2019, Bursah, Karang Ampar village, Central Aceh



Even though houses and farms of local families are destroyed, the local community is trying to live in harmony with elephants. They care for the elephants and recognise their presence as a gift of nature and a heritage of the Aceh Kingdom. At the same time, they feel the need to protect themselves and their properties against the potential damage cause by elephants.

© Nurmasyitah - January 2020, Negeri Antara village, KM 40, Bener Meriah



The community patrol team has made this giant ditch as elephant barrier. It makes it harder for elephants to enter the local village. Two members of the Conservation Response Unit team are monitoring the barrier.

© Herizal – October 2019, Alur Cincin village, Pintu Rime Gayo, Bener Meriah



Women are assembling and operating carbide cannons. Carbide is used to produce exploding sounds to scare elephants away. This tool helps community members to keep their village safe while protecting elephants in the region.

© Zainuddin – November 2019, Alue Limeng village, Bireuen



Local people are planting lemons as a natural barrier to prevent human-elephant conflicts occurring in their village. It is effective because elephants don't like the smell. The lemons are also used for consumption and therefore have economic value.

© Fatimah Zuhra – September 2019, Bergang village, Ketol, Central Aceh



Local communities embrace the potential for wild elephant ecotourism development. The revenues from this ecotourism make it possible for them to turn human-elephant encounters into a long-term, peaceful and sustainable solution.

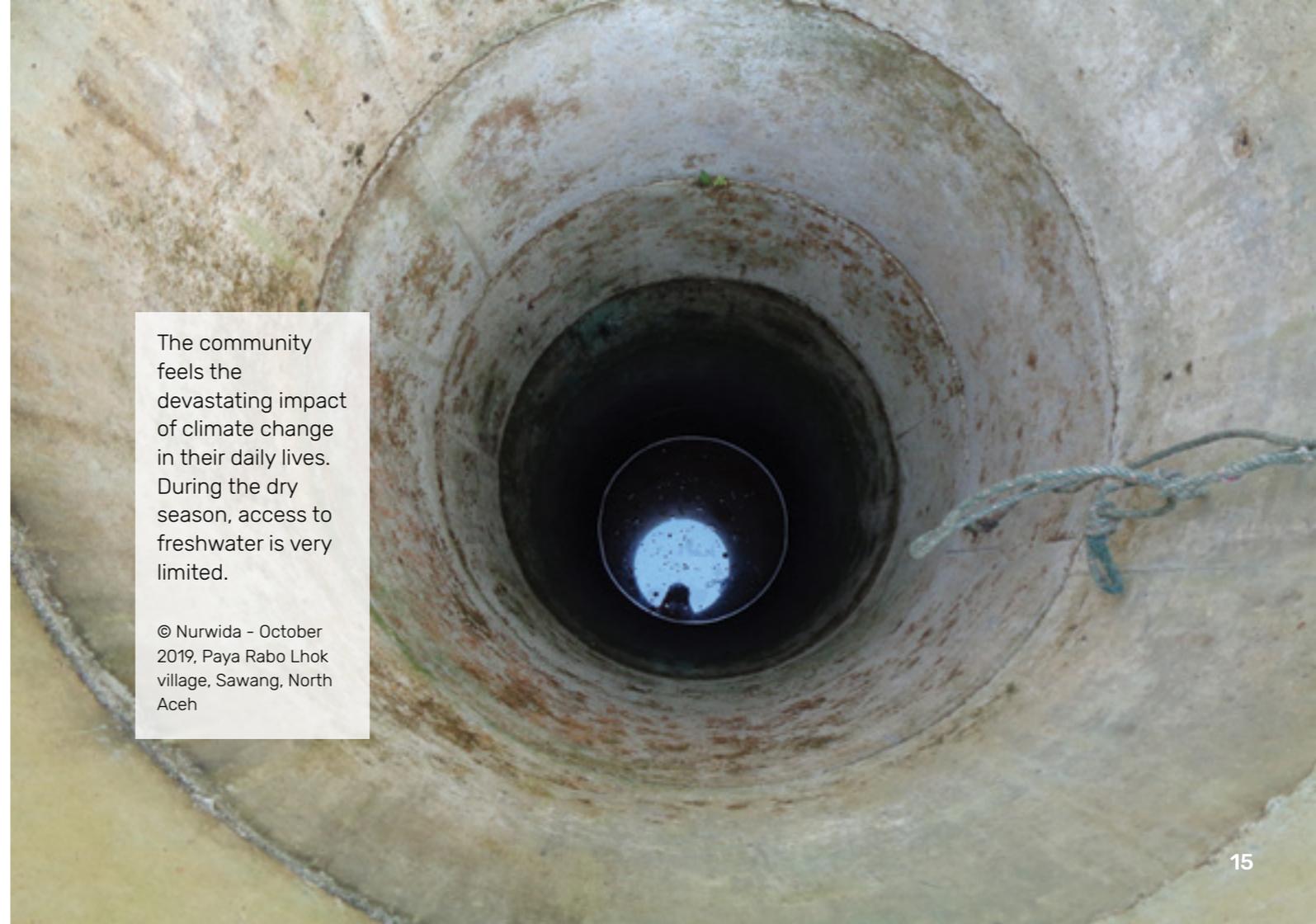
© Aulia Ferizal – November 2019, Alue Limeng village, Bireuen

# CLIMATE



Nurwida, an environmental activist, teaches pupils of Primary School 11 Sawang about the benefits received from the river and its natural surroundings. Young people become aware and are motivated to stay away from illegal logging, poaching and other harmful activities that are contributing to climate change.

© Dara Hilda Maisyita – September 2019, Sawang, North Aceh



The community feels the devastating impact of climate change in their daily lives. During the dry season, access to freshwater is very limited.

© Nurwida - October 2019, Paya Rabo Lhok village, Sawang, North Aceh

By planting new mangrove trees, women do an impressive job for environmental protection. They are highly aware that mangroves are coastal ecosystems that offer significant opportunities to minimise impact of the changing climate by stabilising coastlines and preventing floods. Mangroves also provide livelihood support and food security.

© Iskandar Haka – July 2019, Sungai Lueng village, Langsa Timur, Langsa



'Mangroves do not need humans, but humans need mangroves' is printed on the T-shirt of this man who is cutting small mangrove branches to stimulate faster growth. Community members participate in protection of the coastline through mangrove rehabilitation. Preservation of mangroves is also important because they can capture a lot of CO2. There is potential for economic benefits for communities if mangroves are valued and left intact.

© Iskandar Haka – July 2019, Aramiyah, Birem Bayeun, East Aceh



# FOOD

Due to unsustainable fishing practices such as the use of explosives, fish stock is being reduced and their habitats are damaged. To counter this, local people apply traditional fishing techniques without harming the environment. This way they protect the river's resources to support their community life.

© Ayuraddin – August, 2019, Pintu Rimba village, Peudada, Bireuen





A fishpond is a source of livelihood for coastal communities. WWF facilitates fishpond farmers in applying the principles of sustainable aquaculture. Women are participating in managing the ponds, which has provided them an opportunity for more equality in food production.

© Dara Hilda Maisyita – August 2019, Sungai Lueng village, Langsa Timur, Langsa

In one of the banana export areas, the community is farming in a sustainable way without converting the forest. A remaining challenge is that community farms are often located in areas where elephants search for food.

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Gayo Coffee is a well-known, world class coffee brand and an important product in Central Aceh. It is used for consumption, export and even for making soap and cosmetics. A women's group is using these products to support their families.

© Heny Januatri – November 2019, Rembele village, Kecamatan Bukit, Bener Meriah



The Singkite Bergang women's group enthusiastically processes coffee into masks and scrubs and makes cosmetic products from herbs. They have been able to independently produce and manage products from the forest as a sustainable source of alternative livelihood.

© Dara Hilda Maisyita – December 2019, Karang Ampar village, Central Aceh



# WATER

The Peusangan watershed landscape offers a wealth of natural resources. However, the natural forest cover on the entire hill slope has been destroyed by land conversion and construction work, resulting in a decrease in water quality.

© Ayuraddin - August, 2019, Pintu Rimba village, Peudada, Bireuen



Sand and gravel excavation activities are executed around the Peusangan river basin. Research by the Bireuen Integrated Licensing Service Agency showed that only five locations in the district have licenses, while there are hundreds of illegal excavation sites.

© Zainuddin – February 2020, Bvak, Krueng Simpo village, Juli, Bireuen



Since village leaders have been made aware of the problem of illegal excavation sites, this community now has an agreement for an eligible location to extract sand and gravel. They are in the process of getting a license.

© Zainuddin – September 2019, Paya Cut village, Juli, Bireuen





Rafting is an ecotourism activity in which adventure is balanced with environmental consciousness. Besides offering an alternative source of income, it has helped to reduce the massive transportation of illegal logs, that were before pushed down the river.

© Nurmasyitah - November 2019,  
Pante Peusangan village, Juli,  
Bireuen

The Sungai Lueng river is not only used as a place for parents to earn an income by ecotourism. But also as a way of leisure for children to play around and enjoy the water. Therefore it's even more important to take care of the river.

© Dara Hilda Maisyita -  
July 2019, Sungai Lueng,  
Langsa Timur, Langsa



# COLOFON

## Cover picture

© Gunilla Kuperus - April 2019, Simpang Jaya village, Bireuen. A participant of the workshop practices his photography skills.

## Editorial team

*WWF Indonesia:*

Andri Munazir

Cut Ervida Diana

Munawaratul Makhya

*WWF Netherlands:*

Gunilla Kuperus

Marloes van Luijk

Levent Köseoglu

This booklet is produced in February 2020 for the PandaClick! exhibition 'Visual Voices', about the changes in natural resources in the Indonesian province of Aceh. It shows 21 pictures made by local people. The project is part of the Shared Resources, Joint Solutions (SRJS) programme, a strategic partnership between WWF NL, IUCN NL and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. SRJS works on strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and civil society organisations in sixteen low- and middle-income countries. The programme aims to safeguard climate resilience, water supply and food security by joining forces with the public and private sector.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs

