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The Green Encounters: “Common Good” Narrative and Community Struggle in Halimun Salak Corridor, West Java

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Abstract

Since the colonial era of the East Indies, multiple ruling regimes have promoted a certain narrative to utilize the forests on Mount Halimun Salak for nature preservation and profit accumulation. Existing studies of the designation of Halimun Salak as a conservation area have shown that such an establishment led to conflicts over land and livelihoods with the surrounding communities and local farmers. Complementing these studies, my qualitative research in the Halimun Salak Corridor (HSC) highlights that the “common good” narrative promoted by conservation programs has not benefited people’s livelihoods. Conversely, the expansion of conservation area through HSC has further restricted access for local farmers to forest and hampered the efforts to fulfill their daily needs. Eventually, this loss of sources of livelihood caused a conflict after conservation programs were implemented by the authorities. I argue that such a condition is caused by a bias related to how the “common good” is interpreted by the Indonesian state. This narrative-focused study then offers an avenue to understand the complexities of conservation efforts where the forests are shared between maintaining biodiversity goals and subsistent interests.

Keywords: Conservation, Halimun Salak, Livelihood, Common good

Introduction

Forest degradation is one of the reasons why various countries develop conservation programs. Some governments complement the conservation efforts with various other methods such as replanting trees, preventing logging, setting up an anti-poaching unit to track poachers, or stopping illegal grazing. Nevertheless, conservation projects across the world—such as national parks, protected forests, or green corridors—often ignore the needs of local people and negatively impact surrounding communities (see Chilongo 2014; Derkyi et al. 2014). The condition is not too different in Indonesia. The history of conservation in Indonesia began in the 1880s under the Dutch colonial government. A commission consisting of scientists urged the government to create a forest reserve in the Mount Halimun and Mount Salak areas. A study has provided the government with justification for declaring Halimun Salak as state forest land in early 1940 (Galudra 2015). The Indonesian government then formally established this as a conservation area in 1992 as Taman Nasional Gunung Halimun Salak (TNGHS) or Gunung Halimun Salak National Park (GHSNP) (see Galudra 2000).

In 2003, the Halimun Salak conservation area was expanded by combining two forest areas into one management area, namely the Mount Halimun area and the Mount Salak area, including areas that were previously designated as production forests. Since then, national park
regulations have been implemented strictly: it has to be free from human factors; free from all
resource-tapping activities by local communities; and violations will be subject to legal
enforcement. Consequently, when the government changed the status of Mount Halimun-Salak
into a national park, surrounding communities and local farmers lost their access to the forests
(Rahmawati & Gentini 2008; Fridayanti & Dharmawan 2015; Siscawati 2012; Afiff 2016).

Regarding this change in state forest status, studies by Yogaswara (2009) and Cahyono
(2012) show differing perspectives at play in responding to the Halimun Salak management.
Excluded communities voice their concerns as the conservation prevents them from managing
forests for cultivation and other means of sustenance. Similar to other regions in Indonesia, the
conflict over forest resources in Halimun-Salak has involved many parties at various regional
levels regarding issues of tenure rights, authority and livelihoods (Galudra 2000). The
contrasting interests eventually led to agrarian conflicts in the area (Siscawati 2012; Rahmawati
2013) while the authorities’ politics of ignorance fueled the clash even further (Cahyono 2012).
In my two previous articles (Sardjo et al. 2022a, 2022b), I showed that the history of forest
uses in Halimun Salak has changed the physical condition of the environment as a result of
exploitation and conservation programs. Local residents have been resistant to conservation
programs as they had long managed the areas for agriculture. In light of such lingering
problems and prolonged conflicts there, this current study provides a prequel to the story. In
this article, I question the narrative of the “common good” promised by conservation programs
and the extent of the actual goodness for the local communities around.

This work is inspired by my long engagement with the local residents of Kabandungan
District, Halimun Salak Corridor, West Java since 2010. With a qualitative approach, I
interviewed 26 informants, consisting of national park authorities, farmers and their group
leaders, as well as community leaders. In this article, I also trace the life history of four farmers
who have been living in the precise area for three generations. This research shows that instead
of benefitting the local communities, their livelihoods have become worse after the Halimun
Salak Corridor (HSC) was established.

The expansion of Halimun-Salak through HSC has limited access for local people to
the forest and hampered the effort to fulfill their daily needs. They found it difficult to
understand why they cannot take forest products which have been their source of livelihood.
They do not understand why they had to plant only certain types of trees. They became afraid
and anxious about living in their village because there were many warning signs about the
punishments for loggers and those taking forest products. They felt strange living in the same
environment that has always given them life. I argue that such a condition is caused by the
value gap related to how the “common good” is interpreted by the governing and governed
population. This narrative-focused study then offers an avenue to understand the complexities
of conservation efforts where the forests are shared between maintaining biodiversity goals and
subsistent interests.

Gunung Halimun Salak National Park: A brief excursion

In Indonesia, the legacy doctrine of “eminent domain” (meaning the state reserves
supreme authority over land rights) has become a historical driving force for the continued
expansion of large plantations (Sampat 2013; Davidson 2016). The adoption of “scientific”
forestry in Java then furthered the expansion while excluding smallholders. As a result, in 1905, 40% of the Javanese people were landless (Hall et al. 2011). Although masked as the “country’s prosperity for its people,” the exploitation of forests for plantations has been solely benefiting the authorities.

The same goes with Halimun Salak where the areas were exploited for plantation resources. During colonial cultuur stelsel, Bosswezen (the forestry agency) led the extraction of forest resources while at the same time limiting community access to forests. The high level of exploitation of forest resources at that time, along with pressure from conservationists, encouraged the authorities at the time to carry out nature conservation. Conservation enclave was considered beneficial for all parties and for the availability of natural resources in the future. To support this effort, the Dutch colonial government established Halimun Salak as a natural reserve in early 1940. Since then, the government assigned forest police (polisi hutan or polhut) to monitor the areas and protect them from population interference. Access to state forests for local people as such has become a major issue in forests whose resource extraction is monopolized by the government (Peluso 1992). Even with such an effort, the decline in forest areas persists.

![Figure 1. The Halimun Salak Corridor (white box) within the national park](source: Prasetyo and Setiawan 2007)

To repair damages to former production forest areas, in 2003 the government designated the Halimun Salak Corridor (HSC) area. Based on the Ministry of Forestry Decree No. 175/Kpts-11/2003 the Gunung Halimun National Park area (40,000 ha) has been merged into one unit with the Mount Salak Reservation area as the Gunung Halimun Salak National Park, bringing the total area to 113,357 ha. This expansion has included forests as well as
villages, tea plantations, agriculture and bushland that had developed in the past (GHSNPM-JICA 2009).

Many studies on the Halimun Salak Corridor concern the protection of water harvesters of large cities nearby, the preservation of rare animals (Yumarni et al. 2011), and the safeguarding of various species of flora and fauna (Roseleine et al. 2014). This national park is one of the conservation areas considered vulnerable to human disturbance due to the history of community settlement since the colonial era (Galudra et al. 2005).

The Halimun Salak Corridor was specifically developed to preserve the ecosystem’s biodiversity and protect water catchment areas (Galudra et al. 2005; Yumarni et al. 2011). The corridor connects two comparatively similar wild habitats in Mount Halimun and Mount Salak, and are considered by conservationists to be important for the sustainability of ecological processes because they provide space for the movement of animals and the sustainability of their populations (Supriatna 2019). Furthermore, it made two mountains into a unified landscape with the largest tropical mountain rainforest ecosystem on Java island and functions as a link between Halimun-Salak ecosystems. This ecological service is essential for maintaining the water management of two main river basins, Cianten and Citarik, which in turn provide strategic benefits for socio-economic development in the area (Hakim 2015). The entirety of the project was focused on the ecological function, but how about the people in the surrounding areas?

The appropriation of “common good” narrative

The “Common good” is a widely used and interpreted term. For instance, the Catholic religious tradition defines the common good as "all conditions of social life that enable social groups and their members to have relatively comprehensive and ready access to meet their own needs" (Velasquez, et al 2018). In political science, meanwhile, "common good" refers to everything that is more beneficial and shared by all members of a community, compared to things that benefit individuals or certain parts of society (Longley 2021). The common good in environmental issues is somehow uncertain. The enquiry of the Halimun Salak case is related to the irony when a conservation program that is promoted as common good, but unfortunately, is proven to produce injustice in reality. In this case, how do we process such a political and moral question?

Nature conservation is considered important for the common good in order to preserve nature and provide the necessary resources for human habitation. Along the line, Indonesia ratified several numerous regulations and environmental resolutions. Instances include the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES) of Wild Fauna and Flora through Presidential Decree No.43 1978, Law No.5 1990 concerning Conservation of Forest Resources and Ecosystems, Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) through Law No.5 1994, and many more. The Halimun Salak corridor itself was developed by the government in regard to CITES of Wild Fauna and Flora and was supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA 2006).

Furthermore, the impact of deforestation encourages conservationists to pursue various environmental programs to which the Indonesian government responded by promoting REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) (Galudra 2000) and ratifying the
UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) in 2016. In the context of global climate change, forests have become a public good that is needed to reduce the impact of the planetary crisis on the wider world population. This pattern confirms that conservation policy in Indonesia has been largely driven by pressure from conservationists at the international level. Foreign conservationists themselves have been reported to have a poor record in developing countries as they often take people's land for the sake of environmental preservation (Vidal 2008). Conservation programs for the common good that require forest areas often need protection from various human disturbances. As such, the Halimun Salak Corridor is excluding the local population who are seeing forests as a common resource (common good) that can be used together based on agreed-upon customs.

Efforts to develop conservation areas as is happening in HSC can then be perceived as green grabbing. It is often an “appropriation” of green justification for the transfer of ownership, use rights, and control over resources previously owned by the public or private individuals, from the poor to the more powerful (Fairhead and Leach 2012). Such a relocation of people for the protection of nature and wildlife is a recurring event in nature conservation, especially when there is a perceived conflict between the traditional inhabitants and the protection of nature (Kamal, Grodzińska-Jurczak, and Brown 2015) like what happened to the community I am studying. The people there felt such an arrangement was unfair because they lost their livelihoods by foreign forces. This is the point where the common good arrangement paradoxically disregards “common” interests. The common good should mirror shared basic freedoms and fair economic opportunities for everyone (Velasquez, et al 2018).

Residents who previously occupied the HSK area then secretly use their ability and networks to resist national park conservation rules, including colluding with national park officers. The collective memory of farmers about their struggle for life also encourages collective claims and movements against this state intervention. The collective action to claim the land in the GHSNP was characterized by growing solidarity, the construction of a shared identity, a sense of grievance, and a collective agreement (see Tilly 1998). All of these are epitomized in the form of land occupations in the HSC area for subsistent agricultural activities.

The struggle to overcome the new Common Good

With strict provisions in conservation areas, people are prohibited from hunting, cutting trees, digging rocks, introducing new plants or in any way threatening animals or ecosystems. The land that had been home to local people for centuries was suddenly developed into a beautiful wildlife sanctuary that was vastly different and completely unrelated to the livelihoods of local people (Vidal 2008). The livelihood system of residents who previously lived in the Halimun Salak corridor area changed after the area was designated as a national park.

Before being expanded, the western corridor area was managed by two different authorities; The Mount Halimun area has been managed by a national park and the Mount Salak area and its surroundings have been managed by Perum Perhutani. The area managed by the national park was designated as the core zone, while other areas outside this area are designated as the national park buffer zone (Hakim 2015). Changes in Halimun Salak occurred in several stages and the overlap between different regulations, resulting in land use ambiguity (Hartono
and Kobayashi 2007). For the people living in the surrounding area, it is difficult to understand the provisions zones because previously, they were free to use them based on their past customs.

The people living around the Haimun-Salak forest area consist of the Kasepuhan people, an Indigenous community whose livelihoods rely on forest products. Some others are those who have lived in the area for generations and migrants from other areas who have settled and farmed in the area around the forest. During the colonial period, the trajectory of Halimun Salak conservation was followed by the activities of residents who used forest areas (GHNSP 2008, Fridayanti and Dharmawan 2015). Some interlocutors stated that since the Dutch East Indies era, Cipeutey Village (one of the villages within the conservation area) was a settlement for forced labourers who were brought in from other areas in West Java to work on a tea plantation named Pandan Arum. At that time, the plantation provided bunk beds and daily necessities for the workers because they were not allowed to leave the plantation areas. When the plantations went bankrupt, people took forest products and cleared forests for agricultural land.

Besides farming and agriculture, people are collecting forest products, especially firewood (GHNSP 2008, Fridayanti and Dharmawan 2015). National Park authorities also found residents taking species with economic value such as pole ferns, Palahlar Mursala, Lauraceae, and Fagaceae. As a relatively new concept, ecosystem restoration in Indonesia is considered the same as forest rehabilitation. After the HSC was established, residents were actually prohibited from taking anything from the forest, even if it was a broken tree branch. This new expectation transformed the social and economic lives in the villages. Some local people prefer to be farmers and tea leaf pickers (JICA 2006) while some others find precarious living outside the village and conservation areas.

The HSC policy was implemented by using the prevention of forest degradation by logging practices as justification when it was managed by the state company Perum Perhutani. Environmental policies with narratives of environmental degradation at times destroyed the existing relationship between nature and humans while creating more common problems for the villagers. Environmental policies sometimes interfere with local management, removing local control over resources (Fairhead and Leach 1995). As a public good, forests serve a variety of human needs. Therefore, all citizens are seemingly obligated to participate in conserving forests for the sake of sustainable life. However, poor local residents have no other choice but to follow the unilateral provisions of the national park authorities.

The corridor expansion eventually also forced them to change their interactions with the forest. Mr. Im, a leader of a forest farmer group, said that national park authorities put up warning boards, prohibiting people from entering and taking produce, including timber to build houses. Residents were then introduced to a new way of processing foods, cooking rice using electric cookers and, consequently, changing the fuel from wood to gas. They felt alienated by regulations that appeared suddenly in the village where they lived. They also have experienced mixed feelings such as confusion, fear, anger and resignation. The access to forest resources is not much, but it is essential for the survival of local communities (Berge 2003).

The government's efforts to implement environmental management commitments through conservation policies and social forestry programs have also failed to bring a positive
impact (Hani & Rachman 2007; Purwatiningsih 2012; Pratidina 2014; Prasasti et al. 2015). There is a significant difference between reconciling conservation interests and the welfare of the population and managing conservation areas (Afiff 2016).

Some of the local residents critically questioned the Halimun Salak zoning. The community feels that they are being treated unfairly. They are not allowed to take forest products while geothermal and plantation companies are permitted to operate in the conservation area. They have also noticed that more and more new companies have purchased smallholder lands to develop farming in the area around the national park. Some residents can afford not to sell their lands while others are eventually displaced. They moved to a new place to live and looked for other viable livelihoods, either as laborers for plantations, workers in adjacent cities, or independently scrapping agricultural and non-agricultural opportunities. People who do not have capital and private land, however, could not defend their land or move somewhere else. The only option for them is to clear forest land, “encroaching” into the national park area. To survive, some of the residents continue to use the land in the forest for agriculture to find animal feed, timber, and other forest products. Farmers also plant banana trees to cover the open land. In response, the national park authorities produced a “hazard map” that identifies various forms of disturbance in the national park, particularly encroachment. Af, a youth activist, stated that he and some other people were arrested by officials for taking fern by the forest borders—he was released when a group of activists defended him.

This phenomenon has occurred as the struggle faremers face to survive in a changing environment. Farmers who traditionally cultivated forests now have to change all their traditions and follow various provisions of conservation programs. The common good, which refers to facilities or institutions that provide benefits to community members, has become a wicked tyranny for the community. In this situation, Longley (2021) argues that such problems are caused by the lack or failure of important elements for the common good, such as the neglect of basic rights and freedoms and the absence of fair law enforcement.

Environmental concerns for landscapes, biodiversity and ecosystem services are often framed into environmental narratives that suggest that the primary concern is the protection and preservation of resources that are important for the common good of mankind. The Halimun Salak case here illustrates that the values that merit environmental protection can be very different from the concerns of the traditional commoners. This study provides empirical facts about this proposition.

Conclusion

From my study in the Halimun Salak Corridor, I contend that conservation practices have been influenced by the common good narrative bias. The goods and services provided by nature and valued by conservationists are in some ways very different from the goods and services valued by rural communities. The conservation program that was developed as a "common good" to protect nature and human interests in water reserves and reduce the impact of climate change has in fact not brought good to human beings. This study shows that the policy of expanding the Halimun Salak area has not only changed people's livelihoods but has also changed their way of life—mirroring a mechanism of green grabbing. Many people were forced out of the area where they had lived for a long time due to the expansion of the national
park area, causing livelihood uncertainties due to diminishing business and job opportunities. The struggle for subsistence occurred there because conservation programs ignored the livelihood systems people have had for generations.

Instead of bringing a prosperous future, the narrative of the common good that has been used to legitimize conservation programs has actually excluded the surrounding local communities. Policymaking must be open to everyone, providing equality and fair opportunity (Velasquez, et al 2018) but this does not happen in Halimun Salak Corridor and perhaps also in other conservation areas. This study suggests that designing new institutions to manage protected areas requires a good understanding of traditional commoners and how the new values to be protected differ from and interact with old values. This will be important to achieve a sustainable use of resources within protected areas (Berge 2003).

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