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Denial of long-term issues with agriculture on tropical peatlands will have devastating consequences

Running head:

Denial of long-term issues with tropical peatland agriculture

List of Authors:

Lahiru S. Wijedasa^{1,2,3*}, Jyrki Jauhiainen⁴, Mari Könönen⁴, Maija Lampela⁴, Harri Vasander⁴, Marie-Claire LeBlanc⁵, Stephanie Evers^{6,7,8}, Thomas E.L. Smith⁹, Catherine M. Yule^{7,10}, Helena Varkkey^{7,11}, Massimo Lupascu¹², Faizal Parish¹³, Ian Singleton¹⁴, Gopalasamy R. Clements^{3,6,10,15,16}, Sheema Abdul Aziz^{3,6,16}, Mark E. Harrison^{17,18}, Susan Cheyne¹⁷, Gusti Z. Anshari¹⁹, Erik Meijaard^{20,21}, Jenny E. Goldstein²², Susan Waldron²³, Kristell Hergoualc'h²⁴, René Dommain²⁵, Steve Froking²⁶, Christopher D. Evans²⁷, Mary Rose C. Posa¹, Paul H. Glaser²⁸, Nyoman Suryadiputra²⁹, Reza Lubis²⁹, Truly Santika²¹, Rory Padfield^{7,30,31}, Sofyan Kurnianto^{24,32}, Panut Hadisiswoyo³³, Teck Wyn Lim³⁴, Susan E. Page¹⁸, Vincent Gauci³⁵, Peter J. van der Meer³⁶, Helen Buckland³⁷, Fabien Garnier³⁷, Marshall K. Samuel^{6,7,40,41}, Liza Nuriati Lim Kim Choo⁴⁰, Patrick O'Reilly^{7,42,43}, Matthew Warren⁴⁴, Surin Suksuwan⁴⁵, Elham Sumarga⁴⁶, Anuj Jain^{2,47}, William F. Laurance⁴⁸, John Couwenberg⁴⁹, Hans Joosten⁴⁹, Ronald Vernimmen⁵⁰, Aljosja Hooijer⁵⁰, Chris Malins⁵¹, Mark A. Cochrane⁵², Balu Perumal⁵³, Florian Siegert^{54,55}, Kelvin S.-H. Peh^{56,57}, Louis-Pierre Comeau⁵⁸, Louis Verchot⁵⁹, Charles F. Harvey^{60, 61}, Alex Cobb⁶⁰, Zeehan Jaafar^{1,61}, Henk Wösten⁶², Solichin Manuri⁶³, Moritz Müller⁶⁴, Wim Giesen⁶⁵, Jacob Phelps⁶⁶, Ding Li Yong^{63,67}, Marcel Silvius⁶⁸, Béatrice M. M. Wedeux⁶⁹, Alison Hoyt^{60,61}, Mitsuru Osaki⁷⁰, Hirano Takashi⁷⁰, Hidenori Takahashi⁷¹, Takashi S. Kohyama⁷⁰, Akira Haraguchi⁷², Nunung P. Nugroho⁷³,

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David A. Coomes⁶⁹, Le Phat Quoi⁷⁴, Alue Dohong⁷⁵, Haris Gunawan⁷⁵, David L.A. Gaveau²⁴, Andreas Langner⁷⁶, Felix K. S. Lim⁷⁷, David P. Edwards⁷⁷, Xingli Giam⁷⁸, Guido van der Werf⁷⁹, Rachel Carmenta²⁴, Caspar C. Verwer⁸⁰, Luke Gibson⁸¹, Laure Grandois⁸², Laura Linda Bozena Graham⁸³, Jhanson Regalino⁸³, Serge A. Wich^{8,84}, Jack Rieley⁸⁵, Nicholas Kettridge⁸⁶, Chloe Brown⁸⁵, Romain Pirard²⁴, Sam Moore⁸⁷, B. Ripoll Capilla¹⁷, Uwe Ballhorn⁵⁵, Hua Chew Ho⁸⁸, Agata Hoscilo⁸⁹, Sandra Lohberger⁵⁵, Theodore A. Evans⁹⁰, Nina Yulianti⁹¹, Grace Blackham⁹², Onrizal⁹³, Simon Husson¹⁷, Daniel Murdiyarso^{24,94}, Sunita Pangala³⁵, Lydia E.S. Cole⁹⁵, Luca Tacconi⁹⁶, Hendrik Segah⁹⁷, Prayoto Tonoto⁹⁸, Janice S.H. Lee⁹⁹, Gerald Schmilewski¹⁰⁰, Stephan Wulffraat¹⁰¹, Erianto Indra Putra^{52,102}, Megan E. Cattau¹⁰³, R.S. Clymo¹⁰⁴, Ross Morrison¹⁰⁵, Aazani Mujahid¹⁰⁶, Jukka Miettinen¹⁰⁷, Soo Chin Liew¹⁰⁷, Samu Valpola¹⁰⁸, David Wilson¹⁰⁹, Laura D'Arcy¹⁷, Michiel Gerding¹⁰⁰, Siti Sundari¹¹⁰, Sara A. Thornton^{17,18}, Barbara Kalisz¹¹¹, Stephen J. Chapman¹¹², Ahmad Suhaizi Mat Su¹¹³, Imam Basuki^{24,32}, Masayuki Itoh¹¹⁴, Carl Traeholt¹¹⁵, Sean Sloan⁴⁸, Alexander K. Sayok¹⁰⁶ & Roxane Andersen^{115*}.

Institute of laboratory origin:

¹Department of Biological Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

²ConservationLinks, 433 Clementi Avenue 3, #01-258, Singapore 120433.

³Rimba, Malaysia, 4 Jalan 1/9D Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor, MY 43650, Malaysia.

⁴University of Helsinki, Finland.

⁵Université Laval, Québec, Canada.

⁶School of Biosciences, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Selangor, Malaysia.

⁷Tropical Catchment Research Initiative (TROCARI), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁸School of Natural Sciences & Psychology, Liverpool John Moores University, United Kingdom.

⁹Department of Geography, King's College London, United Kingdom.

¹⁰Monash University Malaysia, Malaysia.

¹¹Department of International & Strategic Studies and Asia-Europe Institute, University of Malaya, Malaysia.

¹²Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

¹³Global Environment Centre, Malaysia.

¹⁴Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Programme, Indonesia.

¹⁵Kenyir Research Institute, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia.

¹⁶Département Écologie et Gestion de la Biodiversité, Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, France.

¹⁷Borneo Nature Foundation, Kalimantan, Indonesia.

¹⁸University of Leicester, United Kingdom.

¹⁹Centre for Wetlands, People and Biodiversity, Tanjungpura University, Western Kalimantan, Indonesia.

²⁰Borneo Futures, Jakarta, Indonesia.

²¹School of Biological Sciences, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.

²²Cornell University, USA.

²³University of Glasgow, United Kingdom.

²⁴Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Indonesia & Peru.

²⁵Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC, USA.

²⁶Institute for the Study of Earth, Oceans and Space, University of New Hampshire, USA.

²⁷Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Bangor, United Kingdom.

²⁸Department of Earth Sciences, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA.

²⁹Wetlands International –Indonesia Programme, Bogor, Indonesia.

³⁰Malaysia-Japan International Institute of Technology, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia.

³¹Department of Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, United Kingdom.

³²Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Oregon State University, USA.

³³Orangutan Information Centre, Sumatra, Indonesia.

³⁴Resource Stewardship Consultants Sdn Bhd, Malaysia.

³⁵School of Environment, Earth and Ecosystem Sciences, The Open University, United Kingdom.

³⁶Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands.

³⁷Sumatran Orangutan Society, London, United Kingdom.

⁴⁰Climate Change Programme, Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (MARDI), Malaysia.

⁴¹Global Research Alliance (GRA), USDA-FAS, Washington State University, Pullman, USA.

⁴²Crops for the Future, Semenyih, Malaysia.

⁴³School of Politics, History and International Relations, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Semenyih, Malaysia.

⁴⁴USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station, USA.

⁴⁵Proforest, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁴⁶School of Life Sciences and Technology, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia.

⁴⁷BirdLife International, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

⁴⁸Centre for Tropical Environmental and Sustainability Science (TESS) & College of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Cairns, Queensland, Australia.

⁴⁹Institute of Botany and Landscape Ecology, University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany.

⁵⁰Deltares, Boussinesqweg 1, 2629 HV, Delft, Netherlands.

⁵¹Cerulogy, London, United Kingdom.

⁵²Geospatial Sciences Center of Excellence, South Dakota State University, USA.

⁵³Malaysian Nature Society, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

⁵⁴GeoBio Center, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Germany.

⁵⁵RSS Remote Sensing Solutions GmbH, Baierbrunn, Germany.

⁵⁶Centre for Biological Sciences, University of Southampton, United Kingdom.

⁵⁷Conservation Science Group, Department of Zoology, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom.

⁵⁸Department of Geography and Resource Management, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.

⁵⁹International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Cali, Colombia.

⁶⁰Singapore-MIT Alliance for Research and Technology, Singapore, Singapore.

⁶¹Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Parsons Laboratory, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

⁶¹Department of Vertebrate Zoology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA.

⁶²Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

⁶³Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University, Australia.

⁶⁴Swinburne University of Technology Sarawak Campus, Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.

⁶⁵Euroconsult Mott MacDonald, Arnhem, The Netherlands.

⁶⁶Lancaster Environment Centre, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom.

⁶⁷Southeast Asian Biodiversity Society, Singapore.

⁶⁸Wetlands International, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

⁶⁹Department of Plant Sciences, University of Cambridge, United-Kingdom.

⁷⁰Hokkaido University, Japan.

⁷¹NPO Hokkaido Institute of Hydro-climate, Japan.

⁷²Kyushu Institute of Technology, Japan.

⁷³Research and Development Institute on Watershed Management Technology, Research, Development and Innovation Agency, Ministry of Environment and Forestry; Indonesia.

⁷⁴Institute for Environment and Natural Resources, National University at HCM City, Vietnam.

⁷⁵Peatland Restoration Agency (BRG), Indonesia.

⁷⁶Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, Directorate D – Sustainable Resources
- Bio-Economy Unit, Italy.

⁷⁷Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom.

⁷⁸School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, University of Washington, Seattle, USA.

⁷⁹Faculty of Earth and Life Sciences, University Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

⁸⁰International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), National Committee of The
Netherlands.

⁸¹School of Biological Sciences, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.

⁸²Laboratoire écologie fonctionnelle et environnement, Université de Toulouse, CNRS,
INPT, UPS, France.

⁸³Borneo Orangutan Survival Foundation (BOSF), Indonesia.

⁸⁴Institute for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Dynamics, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam,
The Netherlands.

⁸⁵School of Geography, The University of Nottingham, United Kingdom.

⁸⁶School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Science, University of Birmingham, United
Kingdom.

⁸⁷Environmental Change Institute, School of Geography and the Environment, University of
Oxford, United Kingdom.

⁸⁸Nature Society (Singapore), Singapore.

⁸⁹Remote Sensing Centre, Institute of Geodesy and Cartography, Modzelewskiego 27,
Warsaw, Poland.

⁹⁰School of Animal Biology, University of Western Australia, Perth, WA, 6009, Australia.

⁹¹University of Palangka Raya, Central Kalimantan, Indonesia.

⁹²Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust, United Kingdom.

⁹³Tropical Forest Ecology and Conservation Division, Faculty of Forestry, Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia.

⁹⁴Department of Geophysics and Meteorology, Bogor Agricultural University, Bogor 16680, Indonesia.

⁹⁵Oxford Long-term Ecology Laboratory, Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom.

⁹⁶Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, Australia.

⁹⁷University of Palangka Raya (UPR), Central Kalimantan, Indonesia.

⁹⁸Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan.

⁹⁹Asian School of the Environment, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

¹⁰⁰International Peatland Society, Jyväskylä, Finland.

¹⁰¹World Wide Fund for Nature, Jakarta, Indonesia.

¹⁰²Faculty of Forestry, Bogor Agricultural University, Bogor, Indonesia.

¹⁰³University of Colorado, Boulder, USA.

¹⁰⁴Queen Mary University of London, London, United Kingdom.

¹⁰⁵Land Surface Flux Measurements Group, Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, Wallingford, United Kingdom.

¹⁰⁶Department of Aquatic Science, Faculty of Resource Science and Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia.

¹⁰⁷Centre for Remote Imaging, Sensing and Processing, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

¹⁰⁸Geological Survey of Finland, Kokkola, Finland.

¹⁰⁹Earthy Matters Environmental Consultants, Glenvar, Letterkenny, Donegal, Ireland.

¹¹⁰Research Center for Biology, Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), Bogor, Indonesia.

¹¹¹Department of Soil Science and Land Reclamation, Faculty of Environment and Agriculture, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland.

¹¹²Ecological Sciences Group, The James Hutton Institute, Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen, Scotland, United Kingdom.

¹¹³Department of Agriculture Technology, Faculty of Agriculture, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia.

¹¹⁴Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan.

¹¹⁵Southeast Asia Program, Research and Conservation Division, Copenhagen Zoo, Denmark.

¹¹⁶Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Faculty of Resource Science and Technology, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia.

¹¹⁵Environmental Research Institute, University of Highlands and Islands, United Kingdom.

****Corresponding authors:***

lahirux@gmail.com & Roxane.Andersen@uhi.ac.uk

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Letter to the Editor

Main Text:

The first International Peat Congress (IPC) held in the tropics - in Kuching (Malaysia) - brought together over 1000 international peatland scientists and industrial partners from across the world (“International Peat Congress with over 1000 participants!,” 2016). The congress covered all aspects of peatland ecosystems and their management, with a strong focus on the environmental, societal and economic challenges associated with contemporary large-scale agricultural conversion of tropical peat

However, recent encouraging developments towards better management of tropical peatlands have been undermined by misleading newspaper headlines and statements first published during the conference. Articles in leading regional newspapers (“Oil palm planting on peat soil handled well, says Uggah,” 2016; Cheng & Sibon, 2016; Nurbianto, 2016a, 2016b; Wong, 2016) widely read across the region, portrayed a general consensus, in summary of the conference, that current agricultural practices in peatland areas, such as oil palm plantations, do not have a negative impact on the environment. This view is not shared by many scientists, or supported by the weight of evidence that business-as-usual management is not sustainable for tropical peatland agriculture.

Peer-reviewed scientific studies published over the last 19 years, as reflected in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Wetland Supplement on greenhouse gas inventories, affirms that drained tropical peatlands lose considerable amounts of carbon at high rates (Drösler *et al.*, 2014). Tropical peat swamp forests have sequestered carbon for millennia, storing a globally significant reservoir below ground in the peat (Page *et al.*, 2011; Dommain *et al.*, 2014). However, contemporary agriculture techniques on peatlands heavily impact this system through land clearance, drainage and fertilization, a process that too often involves fire. Along with biodiversity losses driven by deforestation (Koh *et al.*, 2011; Posa *et al.*, 2011; Giam *et al.*, 2012), the carbon stored in drained peatlands is rapidly lost through oxidation, dissolution and fire (Couwenberg *et al.*, 2009; Hirano *et al.*, 2012; Ramdani & Hino, 2013; Schrier-Uijl *et al.*, 2013; Carlson *et al.*, 2015; Warren *et al.*, 2016). Tropical peat fires are a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions and produce transboundary haze causing significant impacts on human health, regional economies and ecosystems (Page *et al.*, 2002; Marlier *et al.*, 2012; Jaafar & Loh, 2014; Chisholm *et al.*, 2016; Huijnen *et al.*, 2016; Stockwell *et al.*, 2016). With future El-Niño events predicted to increase in frequency and severity (Cai *et al.*, 2014) and with fire prevalence now decoupled from drought years

(Gaveau *et al.*, 2014), future large scale fire and haze events are imminent given the extensive areas of now drained fire prone drained peatlands (Kettridge *et al.*, 2015; Turetsky *et al.*, 2015; Page & Hooijer, 2016).

In reality, just how much of the estimated 69 gigatonnes of carbon (Page *et al.*, 2011) stored in Southeast Asian tropical peatlands is being lost due to agricultural operations under the current management regime is still uncertain. Of great concern is that none of the agricultural management methods applied to date have been shown to prevent the loss of peat and the associated subsidence of the peatland surface following drainage (Wösten *et al.*, 1997; Melling *et al.*, 2008; Hooijer *et al.*, 2012; Evers *et al.*, 2016). Recent projections suggest that large areas of currently drained coastal peatlands will become un-drainable, and progressively be subjected to longer periods of inundation by river and ultimately sea water (Hooijer *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b; Sumarga *et al.*, 2016). With growing risk of saltwater intrusion, agriculture in these coastal lands will become increasingly untenable, calling into question the very notion of “long-term sustainability of tropical peatland agriculture”.

A more accurate view of drained peatland agriculture is that of an extractive industry, in which a finite resource (the peat) is ‘mined’ to produce food, fibre and fuel, driven by global demand. In developing countries with growing populations, there are strong socio-economic arguments for exploiting this resource to support local livelihoods and broader economic development (Mizuno *et al.*, 2016). However, an acceptance that on-going peat loss is inevitable under this scenario. Science-based measures towards improved management, including limitations on the extent of plantation development, can be used to minimise the rate of this peat loss (President of Indonesia, 2011). Such an evidence-based position, supported with data and necessary legal instruments are needed for sustainable futures. The scientifically unfounded belief that drained peatland agriculture can be made ‘sustainable’, and peat loss can be halted, via unproven methods such as peat compaction debilitates the effort to find sustainable possibilities. To a large extent, the issues surrounding unsustainable peatland management have now been recognized by sections of industry (Wilmar, 2013; APP, 2014; Cargill Inc., 2014; Mondelēz International, 2014; Sime Darby Plantation, 2014; APRIL, 2015; Olam International, 2015), government (President of Indonesia, 2014, 2016; Mongabay, 2015; Mongabay Haze Beat, 2015; Hermansyah, 2016) and consumers (Wijedasa *et al.*, 2015). In recognition of the constraints and risks of peatland development, many large and experienced oil palm and pulpwood companies have halted further development on peat and introduced rigorous management requirements for existing peatland plantations (Lim *et*

al., 2012). However, the denial of the empirical basis calling for improved peatland management remains persistent in influential policy spaces, as illustrated by the articles reporting on the conference (“Oil palm planting on peat soil handled well, says Uggah,” 2016; Cheng & Sibon, 2016; Nurbianto, 2016a, 2016b).

The search for more responsible tropical peatland agriculture techniques includes promising recent initiatives to develop methods to cultivate crops on peat under wet conditions (Giesen, 2015; Dommain *et al.*, 2016; Mizuno *et al.*, 2016). While a truly sustainable peatland agriculture method does not yet exist, the scientific community and industry are collaborating in the search for solutions (International Peat Society, 2016), and for interim measures to mitigate ongoing rates of peat loss under existing plantations. Failing to recognize the devastating consequences of the current land use practices on peat soils and failing to work together to address them could mean that the next generation will have to deal with an irreversibly altered, dysfunctional landscape where neither environment nor society, globally or locally, will be winners.

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