

IPCA

Indo-Pacific Conservation Alliance

Preserving Living Landscapes in Asmat, Papua (Irian Jaya), Indonesia

IPCA is working with local Asmat leaders and communities to preserve their forests, rivers, and seas as “living landscapes” that both protect biodiversity and support and sustain local livelihoods.

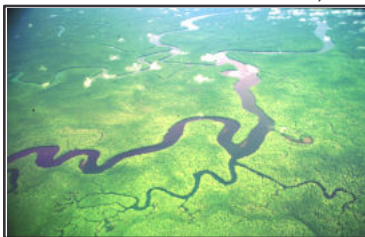


We work as facilitators to our local partner, the Asmat community-based *adat* (“local tradition”) organization, **Lembaga Musyawarah Adat Asmat**, or LMAA. Our strategy is to empower Asmat communities to actively and sustainably manage their natural resources at a time of rapid political change, when their globally important ecosystems are under high threat from destructive commercial logging, fishing, the illegal species trade, and other forms of resource extraction. Our work supports *adat* traditions that preserve biodiversity, while also helping local communities to use their natural resources for their benefit and that of future generations.

IPCA’s efforts with LMAA include capacity-building training, forest tenure resource mapping, and environmental education. One objective is to enhance local commitment to sound natural resource management by local communities. Our work also focuses on building the capacity of *adat* institutions to carry out that vision. Finally, we aim to facilitate alternative sustainable livelihoods and institutions of good governance that are essential to both conservation and human welfare.

The Asmat and their forests

The Asmat are a group of some 70,000 people inhabiting the rainforest lowlands of southwestern Papua (Irian Jaya), Indonesia’s easternmost province. Perhaps the most famous woodcarvers in the Pacific, the Asmat are known for their extraordinary and vibrant art and culture. The Asmat people have inhabited their unique rainforests for thousands of years. Hunting, fishing, and gathering forest products such as sago palm, rattan, fruits, and honey are the basis of the Asmat way of life.



Asmat: a dense and rich maze of rivers and lowland forest; © John Burke Burnett

The Asmat region is part of **Lorentz National Park and World Heritage Site**, the largest national park in the Asia-Pacific region, spanning an altitudinal gradient from sea-level mangroves to equatorial glaciers. The Asmat area is a mosaic of mangroves, swamp forest and among the world’s richest

lowland rainforests, containing a profusion of orchids, parrots, birds-of-paradise, cockatoos, tree kangaroos and other marsupials, and tens of thousands of other species of animals and plants, many still unknown to science. Because local people depend on natural resources for every aspect of their livelihood – from food to canoes to medicine to woodcarving – the rich cultural heritage of the Asmat people is inseparable from the biodiversity of their forests and seas.



Carving a bisj in men’s *jeu* house; © George Steinmetz

Over-fishing by foreign vessels and commercial logging is the most serious current threat in Asmat. The demand in China for wood fiber for paper threatens to bring the massive expansion of outside commercial logging in the region – with potentially devastating social and environmental consequences for the Asmat.



Industrial logging in Papua © John Burke Burnett

Despite these long-term trends, we have already achieved **significant conservation successes** in Asmat, stopping a 150,000 ha. (370,000 acre) clear-cut logging concession, as well as a large commercial fishing operation. These results were brought about by Asmat villagers themselves, who through IPCA’s capacity enhancement training and environmental awareness activities, were keenly aware that they stood to lose a great deal from these activities.

Community-based conservation in Asmat

IPCA’s approach is to work closely with community representatives to understand local perceived needs and to identify and support shared goals, thereby establishing a strong emphasis on self-reliance and community initiative. This approach of long-term technical assistance and training to community organizations without imposing an outside model of conservation or sustainable development is critical to avoid “cargo cult” dependencies that have impacted such efforts elsewhere in Melanesia.

Recent political changes in Indonesia resulted in new openness in addressing long-standing grievances and affirming traditional local rights. This has provided a crucial window of opportunity for the Asmat people to document and assert their traditional forest tenure rights. In late 1998, several Asmat community leaders, led by Yufen Biakai, Donatus Pombai, and others, established LMAA to represent and articulate the interests of the Asmat community in promoting sound and self-reliant economic development, through the sustain-able use of natural resources.

LMAA approached IPCA in early 1999 to request help on a series of projects that empower the Asmat as stewards of their forests, rivers, and seas. We have provided critical tools and training to LMAA and local FAR councils to help them carry out projects such as forest mapping and school-based environmental education.



Yufen Biakai and Donatus Pom bai, © IPCA

This transfer of skills is essential for Asmat self-reliance and preservation of their way of life. We facilitate, rather than directly carry out these projects, in order to build the confidence and capacity of local institutions to carry out activities and to build a strong basis for sustainable development that will help maintain Asmat traditions.

IPCA is assisting the Asmat in an integrated program that is:

- Providing tools, training, and equipment to LMAA to establish and enhance their management capacity;
- Mapping their traditional forests and marine areas which will be used in discussions to assert their land rights;
- Providing tools and training to allow the Asmat to monitor and report illegal logging and fishing by outsiders;
- Helping local teachers to design and implement school curriculums that enhance appreciation and build pride in their land, culture, and biodiversity;
- Using two expatriate trainers to act as facilitators to LMAA's work that assists management plans and bookkeeping, monitors forest logging and fishing, devises a new school-based curriculum integrating environmental education, and creates maps that document traditional forest and marine tenure.

In addition, IPCA acknowledges that in order to conserve the biodiversity of Asmat, the biological and cultural priorities of the local people must be considered. Therefore, IPCA is working with other partners such as the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) to combine conventional methodologies for collecting biodiversity data

with ethnobiological, social, cultural and economic assessments. These assessments will be locally-adapted from CIFOR's Multi-disciplinary Landscape Assessment (MLA) and will reveal how the local people perceive their landscape and biodiversity and the importance they place on their natural resources. The information gathered by these surveys will facilitate understanding by other stakeholders of the importance of biological resources to the livelihoods and culture of the Asmat. This newfound understanding can in turn be used by the government and other stakeholders in development and conservation planning.



Donatus Pom bai and Susan O'Farrell work out coordinates for forest tenure mapping project. © IPCA

IPCA has made significant progress since we began working with the Asmat. IPCA leveraged an agreement between the LMAA, the Danish Embassy and UNESCO to establish a community-based radio network that provides social, health, education and environmental information and news to remote villages throughout Asmat. The tools and training supplied to LMAA have enabled them to complete forest tenure maps for large areas of Asmat. Also, under the guidance of IPCA facilitators, a consensus has been reached on a long-term strategy to diversify local economies and establish sustainable, community-based microenterprises.

With the demonstrated strong commitment of Asmat community leaders and support from the international community, the future of the Asmat people and their forests, rivers, and seas can be bright and full of hope.

About IPCA

The Indo-Pacific Conservation Alliance (IPCA) is a non-profit scientific and educational organization dedicated to the study and conservation of the native ecosystems of the tropical Indo-Pacific region and support for traditional peoples in their stewardship of these globally significant natural resources. Based in Honolulu, Hawaii, IPCA was founded in 1998 with scientists from the Smithsonian Institution, Bishop Museum (Honolulu), and other organizations.



Raggiana Bird of Paradise (Paradis aea raggiana) © Bruce Beehler

For more information on IPCA or our work in Asmat and Lorentz, please contact us at the address below.

IPCA is a 501(c)(3) non-profit scientific and educational organization. Contributions to IPCA are tax-deductible to the extent provided by IRS regulations.