

In northeast Borneo flows a mighty brown river called the Kinabatangan. Endangered estuarine crocodiles sun themselves on logs in the river, Asian elephants—one of the world's most endangered species—bathe in its waters, and Sumatran rhinos, trotting on the edge of extinction, are believed to still roam the area. It is a wild place where all the shades of green

Asia, it is dominated by dipterocarps, a family of tall trees not found on other continents. It is in these forests, which support wild fruit trees that animals feed on, where biodiversity is most rich.

Since the 1970s, industrial agriculture has been Southeast Asia's primary source of deforestation, with oil palms leading the way. A cash crop that thrives in poor soil, oil palms don't

## BORNEO ON THE BRINK

BY SUZANNE HURT

on the planet weave themselves into a tapestry of leaves, fronds, vines and blades stretched between earth and sun.

It is also a place where wildlife and traditional lifestyles face mortal threats. Not far from the river, rows of cultivated oil palms stand like exclamation marks where rain forest

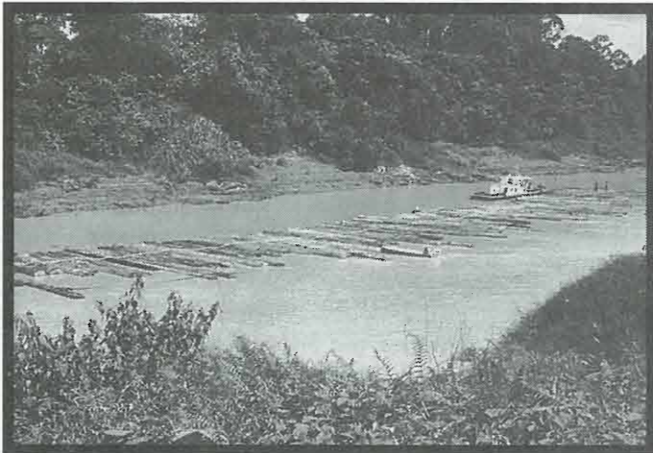
require a huge investment, yet they yield a fast turnaround. And demand for palm oil, which is used for cooking, is growing rapidly, especially in developing countries.

By 1996, more than 50 percent of the Kinabatangan's ancient forest had been cleared and replaced by oil palms, which prosper on dry, flat or gently sloping ground. "Virtually all such areas have been converted to oil palm already," said Geoffrey Davison, director of Sabah operations for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

As the forest vanishes, so do the habitats that support wild creatures, and so do the natural resources that provide clean water, food and income for locals. Converting forest to agriculture is the primary reason large mammal populations are shrinking, according to the WWF. People who have been living along the Kinabatangan for decades say elephants are eating more crops, and river catches are dwindling.

In May, the WWF launched an effort to protect Kinabatangan forests and the living things that depend on them. The program would establish a 66,690-acre Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary. Its organizers also seek to form alliances between conservationists and development interests by establishing sustainable-use projects and fostering awareness that a forest's best asset is its ecological contributions to the world.

*For more information, contact WWF Malaysia, PO Box 14393, 88850 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia.*



*The lush forests of Borneo are vanishing. Native trees are cut, gathered into log rafts like the one above, and replaced by crops.*

once leaned against the Bornean sky. Here in the Malaysian state of Sabah and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, forests are being logged, cleared and converted to agricultural uses as developing Asian countries try to pump cash into struggling economies.

Scientists consider the Kinabatangan rain forest a natural heritage area of international importance. Like other forests of Southeast