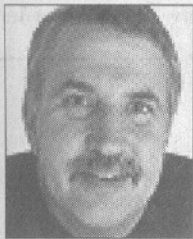


In the Age of Noah

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By Thomas L. Friedman

We may be the first generation in human history that literally has to act like Noah - to save the last pairs of a wide range of species that are threatened with extinction

FOR so many years, Indonesians, like many of us, have been taught that life is a trade-off: healthy people with lots of jobs or healthy forests with lots of gibbons - you can't have both. But the truth is you have to have both. If you don't, you'll eventually end up with neither, and then it will be too late even for Noah.

A couple of weeks ago, The Times's Jim Yardley reported from China that the world's last known female Yangtze giant soft-shell turtle was living in one Chinese zoo, while the planet's only undisputed, known giant soft-shell male turtle was living in another - and together this aging pair were the last hope of saving a species believed to be the largest freshwater turtles in the world.

It struck me as I read that story that our generation has entered a phase that no previous generation has ever experienced: the Noah phase. With more and more species threatened with extinction by The Flood that is today's global economic juggernaut, we may be the first generation in human history that literally has to act like Noah - to save the last pairs of a wide range of species.

Or as God commanded Noah in Genesis: "And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to

weaker and weaker".

The world is rightly focused on climate change. But if we don't have a strategy for reducing global carbon emissions and preserving biodiversity, we could end up in a very bad place, like in a crazy rush into corn ethanol, and palm oil for biodiesel, without enough regard for their impact on the natural world.

"If we don't plan well, we could find ourselves with a healthy climate on a dead planet", said Glenn Prickett, senior vice president of Conservation International.

I met one of our generation's

Javan gibbon rehabilitation center, a collection of cages embedded in the mountains of Gunung Gede Pangrango National Park, near Jakarta, where male and female gibbons - which are known for their lengthy courtships, not one-night stands - get to know each other over months. First, they live in forest cages side by side, then together and then, if everything works, they produce a couple of babies.

But the process is so slow, and the species so endangered, we may soon be down to the last few pairs - a great loss. Watching a gibbon

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keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female".

Unlike Noah, though, we're also the ones causing The Flood, as more and more forests, fisheries, rivers and fertile soils are gobbled up for development. "The loss of global biological diversity is advancing at an unprecedented pace", Sigmar Gabriel, Germany's environment minister, recently told the BBC. "Up to 150 species are becoming extinct every day. ... The web of life that sustains our global society is getting

Noahs here in Indonesia: Dr Jatna Supriatna, a conservation biologist who runs Conservation International's Indonesia programmes. One of his main projects is saving the nearly extinct Javan gibbon, a beautiful primate endemic to the Indonesian island of Java. The Javan gibbon population, decimated by deforestation, is down to an estimated 400, spread out around 20 tropical forest areas in West Java.

Mr Supriatna helps run the

swing from tree limbs, ropes and bars is like watching a small ape win the Olympic gold medal in gymnastics.

The only way to head off species loss in Indonesia, the country with the most diverse combination of plants, animals and marine life in the world, is the old truism, "It takes a village". So much of his work here, said Mr Supriatna, is trying to build coalitions by melding businesses that have an interest in preserving

the forest - the geothermal energy investor, for example, who needs trees to maintain the watershed for his power plant - with local governments, which have an interest in preventing illegal logging, with local villagers who need forests to prevent soil erosion and provide fresh water.

Environmentalists here constantly have to work against corrupt local officials, who get bought off by logging interests, and villagers who don't understand how important the forests are to their daily lives. One of his recent projects, said Mr Supriatna, was to pipe fresh water from the forest watershed to a nearby village so people there understood the connection. Lately, he has taken his work to the imams who run the local Muslim schools.

"We teach them that the source of the water comes from the mountain and the park", he said. "And if the park is gone, they will not have the clean water they need for prayer rituals. If you influence the imam, he will influence all the kids."

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