

Forest Plundering in the Forest Management Unit (KPH) Randublatung, Blora Regency: Types of Plundering and the Involvement of External Community Actors

Nazal Chilmi Ulyatin, Singgih Tri Sulistiyono,* Yety Rochwulaningsih

Master Program of History, Faculty of Humanities,
Universitas Diponegoro, Semarang, Central Java - Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: singgihtri@lecturer.undip.ac.id

DOI: <https://10.14710/ihis.v8i1.19219>

Abstract

This study examines forest plundering in KPH Randublatung involving individuals from outside the forest communities. The Reformation era marked the beginning of numerous demonstrations in both urban and rural areas across various regions. In forest villages where communities have close geographical proximity to state forests, one form of particularly intense demonstration was forest plundering. As residents of forest villages, or communities living near KPH, they have engaged in the practice of *mblandong* even since the colonial period. Acts of taking wood from state forests have occurred for a long time. However, in the lead-up to the Reformation, taking wood from the forest evolved beyond mere theft, escalating into acts of plundering. This study analyzes the factors driving forest plundering, which also involved parties from outside the forest villages. The research findings indicate both internal (village community) and external factors contributing to the plundering. Internal factors include community customs, perceptions, and the necessity for survival amidst an environment that does not guarantee livelihood sustainability. External factors include political instability in the lead-up to the Reformation, which created opportunities for plunderers due to the absence of legal certainty. Additionally, the emergence of financiers driven by the demand for teak wood in the market also fueled organized and structured plundering. These actions were often supported by security forces.

Keywords: Reformation; Forest Plundering; Teak Forest; Forest Communities; *Blandong*.

Introduction

The 1998 Reformation movement in Indonesia dismantled the political legitimacy of Suharto's regime, which had ruled the country for many years. Cases of corruption, collusion, and nepotism were rampant during the New Order era, even reaching the village government level. Such practices thrived under Suharto's leadership, creating a widening gap between the rich and the poor. The resulting inequality ignited the anger of the people, who initially remained silent but eventually voiced their aspirations and engaged in protests. The situation worsened with the onset of the monetary crisis in early 1997, marked by the weakening of the rupiah exchange rate ("Kredit hutan rakyat," 1998).

The turmoil of the Reformation was also characterized by student

demonstrations demanding change. Not only students but also ordinary citizens staged protests in their own regions. One prominent form of protest was forest plundering in various areas, including KPH Randublatung. The plunderers disregarded the importance of forests for both the surrounding communities and the nation as a whole. Randublatung is a sub-district in Blora where a significant portion of the land is forested. The residents of Randublatung primarily rely on the agricultural sector for their livelihoods.

Considering the geographical conditions of Randublatung, with its limestone soil and distance from river basins, it is indeed not very productive for agriculture. This became one of the reasons why forest villagers resorted to desperate measures for survival. As the agricultural sector could not sustain their lives, the community had to seek alternative means of survival. While some people still engaged in farming, they were a minority. Most of the Randublatung population chose to migrate to cities in search of better opportunities. Those who stayed usually opted to cultivate secondary crops, gather firewood, collect leaves, or engage in *mblandong* (communities living near forests who manage teak forests). The practice of *blandong* has existed since the Dutch colonial era (Zalaluddin & Zuhdi, 2017).

In 1998, the rule of law in Indonesia weakened, leading to numerous demonstrations. These cases spread to various regions, including forest plundering in Blora Regency. The theft of teak wood, which escalated into forest plundering, not only exceeded tolerable limits but also caused damage to the ecosystem. Perum Perhutani Unit I Central Java reportedly suffered losses reaching 208 billion rupiah. KPH Randublatung is one of the areas under Perum Perhutani Unit I Central Java. According to a report in the *Suara Merdeka* newspaper, the extent of forest land in KPH Randublatung damaged by plundering in 1998 was 17,824.48 hectares (“Hutan di Blora rusak akibat penjarahan sejak 1998,” 2003). The reason for the increasing prevalence of timber plundering in Randublatung was the rising unemployment rate in the villages. Many people returned to their villages from cities due to layoffs, meaning they were no longer employed. This also became one of the triggers for forest plundering. On the other hand, the political and governmental situation in Indonesia leading up to the Reformation was highly unstable, prompting mass defiance against the government, including in the forestry sector.

The reasons behind people exploiting forests illegally can be linked to James C. Scott's theory (1992), which states that the shrinking of land and job opportunities forces communities in certain areas to make tragic choices. Thus, it can be argued that the theft of wood, which had been cultivated for decades since the 1950s and 1970s, was a logical consequence of the unavailability of land to meet the community's needs. Initially, the pattern of wood theft in forests occurred seasonally, during lean seasons, festive seasons, and before holidays. However, towards the 1970s, the pattern of wood theft shifted from seasonal to year-round (Simon, 1982).

Poverty stands as a significant factor influencing community actions within the socio-economic sphere, particularly in their pursuit of survival. The series of events surrounding the Reformation, which unfolded from 1998 onwards, was accompanied

by extensive forest plundering across various regions, including the forest areas within the Forest Management Unit (KPH) Randublatung. This study analyzes the behavior of theft and forest plundering in Randublatung. It is suspected that these illegal actions are not solely driven by economic factors but also represent organized activities involving certain government individuals. This issue is addressed through the following research questions: How did forest plundering occur in Randublatung? What factors influenced the actions of the community members who engaged in forest plundering? How did the network system of plundering operate in Randublatung?

Several researchers have conducted studies on the 1998 teak forest plundering in KPH Randublatung. Kusumawati (2011) examined the conflictual relationship between Perhutani (the state-owned forestry company) and the *blandong* (forest villagers involved in teak forest management), tracing the emergence of the *blandong* in forest exploitation back to the 19th century. Endra (2011) also discussed the changing image of the *blandong* in the eyes of the community and the government. Another study was conducted by Wulan et. al. (2003) in an article titled Analysis of Forestry Sector Conflicts in Indonesia 1997-2003: The Case of Industrial Plantation Forests of Perum Perhutani Unit I Central Java. This study explored the conflict between forest farmers, *blandong*, and the government from an economic perspective. These previous studies reveal a lack of research addressing the involvement of individuals from outside the village community in the forest plundering in KPH Randublatung in 1998, highlighting the importance of this case study.

Method

This research employs the historical method, which comprises four stages: heuristic, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The first stage, heuristic, involves the process of searching for and collecting data and sources. This study utilizes sources from literature discussing forest plundering in KPH Randublatung, as well as reports on plundering incidents obtained directly from the archives of the KPH Randublatung office and Perum Perhutani Unit I Central Java. Furthermore, the researcher utilized newspapers and magazines containing articles on plundering incidents in Blora Regency, particularly KPH Randublatung, including *Wawasan*, *Suara Merdeka*, *Kompas*, and *Pikiran Rakyat* obtained from the library of Perhutani Unit I Central Java. The second stage involves source criticism, where the collected sources undergo external criticism. In the third stage, the sources are interpreted and analyzed. Finally, the fourth stage involves compiling the results of the interpretation and analysis into a historical work (historiography).

Forest Plundering in KPH Randublatung, 1998

The instability of the central government's political situation triggered plundering in KPH Randublatung. The social, political, and economic conditions in Indonesia had been turbulent since mid-1997, marked by the depreciation of the rupiah, leading to a fragile national economy. The impact was deeply felt by communities, even at the village level. Farmers suffered greatly due to the drastic decline in commodity prices.

However, the instability and economic turmoil were not the sole primary factors in the timber plundering case in KPH Randublatung, as wood theft had existed for several decades prior. Nevertheless, in the lead-up to and during the Reformation until 1999, forest plundering in KPH Randublatung intensified, as evidenced by data from the monthly reports of KPH Randublatung in 1999. In 1996, the theft of teak wood reached 6,458 trees, while in 1997, it increased to 6,613 trees.

The 1998 economic crisis had a significant impact, resulting in widespread forest plundering. Cases that were previously limited to wood theft escalated into large-scale plundering. The euphoria of the Reformation provided an opportunity for villagers to enter the forest without fear of security forces. This is evident from the surge in wood theft in KPH Randublatung in May 1998. Within a single month, a recorded 3,500 trees were plundered (“Antisipasi lanjutan amuk massa,” 1998).

Teak forests in Blora Regency were one of the eight commodities targeted by plunderers (“KPH Randublatung,” 1998). Some forest plundering incidents even involved groups of up to 70 people. Apart from political factors and poverty, certain financial actors played a significant role in encouraging the community to engage in plundering. Theft was no longer merely for firewood or home repairs but had evolved into organized networks involving individuals with financial resources (KPH Randublatung, 2000). The involvement of these individuals transformed routine theft into a more organized and structured economic activity. The growth of the teak wood market and the influx of financiers further strengthened the indications of wood theft in KPH Randublatung. In the lead-up to and during the early Reformation period, organized groups emerged, freely engaging in large-scale theft and plundering of forests. The organized nature of these activities is evident from the following statement by a plunderer:

“If there's an order from a buyer, I and 10-20 of my friends immediately head to the forest. Everyone has their assigned roles, some as tree fellers, others transporting the wood from the felling site to the vehicles, and some keeping watch for security personnel.”

The involvement of financial backers made the teak wood plunderers in KPH Randublatung even more uncontrollable. Many parties were implicated in the plundering cases, including timber company owners, individuals within Perum Perhutani, and even forest security personnel (Perum Perhutani Unit I Central Java, 1990). In July 1998, 30 Perhutani employees and 7 structural officials were suspected of involvement in the illegal trade of teak wood (“Tujuh pejabat Perhutani Jateng dipecat karena terlibat penjarahan,” 1998).

The events culminated on June 28, 1998, when Mobile Brigade Corps (Brimob) and forest police officers on patrol opened fire on civilians. Residents of Dukuh Bapangan, Randublatung, who were collecting wood in plot 121 of the Kedungsambi Forest Management Section (RPH), KPH Randublatung, named Darsid, Rebo, and Kasman, encountered the forest police (“Antisipasi lanjutan amuk massa,” 1998). Darsid was fatally shot at the scene, while Rebo and Kasmin were rushed to the

hospital (“Tindakan keras tidak menyelesaikan masalah,” 1998).

Darsid's death sparked outrage among the community, leading to significant unrest. People living near the forest, particularly from the Menden district, engaged in looting and vandalized Perhutani's facilities and infrastructure as an act of revenge. They even set fire to the Perhutani Kedungsambi official residence, the Beran Forest Ranger's official residence, the Kedungsambi Foreman's official residence, and the Pabin (Forest Police) Office. The incident resulted in losses reaching Rp. 171,915,000 (LP/20/VI/98/POLSEK RDB, June 28, 1998).

The unrest persisted, and the actions of the residents escalated uncontrollably as they plundered the forest, indiscriminately felling trees without regard for environmental ethics. One location in RPH Kedungsambi was looted by 100 people within three days. With such force, they managed to cut down 2,000 trees with diameters exceeding 19 cm and ages ranging from 30 to 40 years (“Antisipasi lanjutan amuk massa,” 1998). Between July and September, Perhutani lost a total of 22,320 teak trees in a forest area spanning 80 hectares (“Jati terbaik di dunia dijarah,” 1998).

In 1999 and beyond, wood theft continued, but unlike the large-scale plundering involving hundreds of people in 1998, it became more organized. In subsequent years, the looting was carried out in a more structured manner by groups of individuals, most of whom possessed knowledge and experience regarding timber and the forest terrain.

Forest Plundering: Community Involvement between Economics and Law

The forest plundering case in Randublatung serves as an example of the ripple effects of the Reformation at the local level. The government's prohibitions did not deter the local community from utilizing the forest, leading to conflicts between the forest authorities, namely Perhutani, and the forest villagers. The routine act of wood theft eventually evolved into a tradition. This tradition arose from differing perceptions: the state viewed the forest as a source of national revenue to be utilized for the people's prosperity, while the forest villagers considered it communal property to be preserved. The conflict stemming from these contrasting perceptions and the tradition of illegal wood theft had existed since the Dutch Colonial Government era.

The forest villagers of Randublatung were well aware of the existing forest protection laws. They understood that felling trees and taking wood from state forests could be prosecuted as theft. However, based on the perceptions and social norms of the local village community, *mblandong* (forest management by local communities) might be considered a legal activity. The presence of *blandong* in the lives of forest communities was difficult to eliminate, as it had become an integral part of their customs. It can be argued that *mblandong* represents a form of adaptation by the community to the forest environment.

Based on these perceptions, it can be identified that the act of theft occurred due to multiple factors. One factor was economic, driven by the need for survival, as the income of farmers in Randublatung was insufficient to support their livelihoods. Additionally, it was fueled by community dissatisfaction with forest management. The

community felt disadvantaged in the profit-sharing arrangement with Perhutani regarding forest products, leading to social inequality. Another factor contributing to wood theft was the involvement of financiers. The development of the teak wood market attracted investors, resulting in collaboration between certain individuals. This further intensified the act of theft, coupled with the unstable political situation ("Penjarahan melibatkan 100 orang lebih," 1998). The routine theft, which evolved from a tradition of violation into an organized and structured economic activity, made it challenging to stop the plundering.

Emotionally, the environment significantly influences the mentality of the community, just as community habits can alter the environment. These habits have shaped collective experiences and memories. The experiences referred to are the shared feelings of adapting to the environment, recorded by humans through their senses, as exemplified by the perception of the Randublatung community towards the forest environment. People living alongside the forest naturally have lifestyles closely connected to forest-related matters. The habits of managing and utilizing the forest, which is part of their living space, have provided continuous stimuli. Consequently, anything related to the forest will also be collectively responded to by the forest community, or in other words, they have a unified response. An example of this is their reaction to perceived injustice in the profit-sharing system. However, community actions in response to injustice or other inequalities are not the sole factors leading to specific actions like forest plundering. These explanations can be formulated as factors of community habits, mindset, and perceptions. The geographical proximity to the forest indirectly created a sense of ownership, even though the forest legally belongs to the state (Sarwono, 1992, pp. 89-100).

Mblandong has become an ingrained part of the customs of the forest villagers in Randublatung. This signifies that the practice of *mblandong* is widely accepted within the community, despite its stark contrast with legal regulations. For these villagers, the forest is an integral part of their lives, rendering *mblandong* a commonplace and permissible activity. However, from a legal standpoint, this activity constitutes theft due to the ownership rights associated with forest assets. The perception that the forest is communal property leads to a lack of reaction from the community when someone takes wood from the forest. A different response would occur if someone were to steal livestock from a villager. They would be pursued for theft, whereas "stealing" wood from the forest is not perceived as an offense (Zalaluddin & Zuhdi, 2017). The community would impose distinct social sanctions on livestock thieves and "wood thieves," or even no sanctions at all on those who steal wood.

The community's response to *blandong* significantly influences the continuation of *mblandong* activities in Randublatung. The perpetrators of *mblandong* enjoy a degree of comfort due to the weak or even non-existent social sanctions imposed by the surrounding community. This perception has often led to the community being caught off guard by *mblandong* activities carried out by individuals from outside the village. The shared sense of hardship has fostered a similar perception among the community regarding forest management and the act of *blandong*.

Implementation of Organized Plundering

The process of timber plundering typically begins with felling trees within the forest areas managed by Perhutani. The felled trees are then transported out of the forest. The final stage involves the marketing of the timber. Meanwhile, the methods of wood theft vary. There are two types of thieves: direct thieves (workers, *blandong*, third parties) and indirect thieves (disguised as traders, officials, etc.). Astraatmadja (2002) categorizes thieves into two types: professional thieves and amateur thieves. Professional theft involves routine, organized theft on a large scale, with a significant business orientation, often involving many workers. On the other hand, amateur theft is carried out for personal needs, involving small quantities and occurring sporadically. This type of theft is commonly observed during festive seasons.

Based on these statements regarding theft types, *mblandong* activities can also be classified into three categories

Individual

Individual wood theft is carried out independently and in an unorganized manner. The theft begins in the early morning, with the thieves carrying basic logging tools such as axes, machetes, ropes, and measuring tapes. These individuals typically engage in this activity to fulfill personal needs, such as constructing house pillars, making household furniture, selling semi-finished goods, and most commonly, collecting firewood. Individual wood theft is conducted independently, resulting in higher risks compared to group theft. One of the most significant risks is the inability to resist authorities when caught, as they lack any backing. If they do come in groups, it is usually with family members or friends who are also local residents. In addition to using simple tools for felling, they also employ basic transportation methods. They typically carry the wood out of the forest on their shoulders or transport it using bicycles. The amount of wood taken is usually limited, ranging from one to three logs, depending on their needs, available manpower, and equipment.

Group

As the name suggests, group wood theft involves a large number of people, ranging from 20 to 100, thus falling under the category of forest plundering. Each group is organized by a leader who directs the actions and acts as the group's protector. The leader also has extensive connections with relevant parties, such as forest security personnel and even Perhutani employees. They possess excellent communication skills, enabling them to establish connections with various officials to facilitate *blandong* activities. One way to establish these connections is through lobbying for information about forest patrols. They typically obtain information about patrol points to evade forest police. These activities undoubtedly constitute corruption, collusion, and nepotism, as the relationships are built not only on familiarity but also through the exchange of bribes or gratuities (“*Penjarahan kayu jati dibekingi oknum aparat,*” 2000).

Organized

The actions of organized plundering groups are similar to those of group plunderers. The distinction lies in the fact that organized plunderers operate based on specific timber orders placed by buyers. The work process for organized groups is also commanded by a leader. They usually receive timber orders from large companies that contact the leader through intermediaries. Additionally, organized groups involve government officials who pose as timber entrepreneurs, using their wives or relatives as company owners. Meanwhile, intermediaries are responsible for seeking orders to meet the demand for timber. Upon receiving an order, the leader mobilizes the entire workforce to supply the requested timber. The community members who serve as laborers are then paid in cash. The plunderers only fell trees in the quantity and according to the specifications of the order. The harvested timber is then delivered to the buyer ("Tujuh pejabat Perhutani Jateng dipecat karena terlibat penjarahan," 1998).

The transportation of timber was carried out through various means, often requiring the deception of officials. On average, the ordered timber was transported using trucks or open-bed vehicles. The plunderers typically employed tactics such as using counterfeit Forest Product Transport Permits (Surat PAS) or mixing legal and illegal timber to facilitate the delivery of wood to the buyers.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion, it can be concluded that the routine theft was carried out by the community due to the perception that the forest is communal property. However, in the context of theft evolving into plundering, it was also interpreted as a moment of freedom for the community during the Reformation era. As forest villagers, the residents' economy heavily relied on the forestry and agricultural sectors. The unfavorable geographical conditions, hindering optimal agricultural production, prevented the population from meeting their basic needs. This situation contributed to poverty in the areas surrounding the forest. From the perspective of the forest environment, the forest and its abundant natural resources were perceived by the surrounding community as a source of wealth, to be utilized and preserved collectively. Randublatung, with its vast expanse of teak forests, has sustained the communities living near the forest for centuries. The residents heavily depend on the teak forest for their livelihoods, engaging in activities such as collecting firewood, selling leaves, working as blandong laborers, serving as forest guards and security personnel, participating in forest product sharing agreements ("pesanggem"), and even working as office staff or employees for Perhutani. For generations, the people of Randublatung have been accustomed to and naturally worked in the forest to provide for their families.

The 1998 Reformation was fundamentally a national event, but it is intriguing to examine the events that unfolded in various regions as a form of protest against the New Order leadership. The deteriorating economic conditions, coupled with the chaotic national political instability, served as primary reasons for these occurrences.

The demonstrations that originated in the capital city of Jakarta spread to various regions, including Blora. These actions manifested as forest plundering in different forests within Blora Regency. KPH Randublatung became one of the commodities targeted by the plunderers.

Forest utilization was accompanied by local wisdom as forest communities, exemplified by the concept of "tebang dan tanam" (cut and plant). This concept emerged as a form of devotion by the forest community to their communal rights, where their perception of the forest as shared property necessitates its care and preservation. The community has made efforts, including seeking alternative livelihoods outside the region. The primary issue lies in the low levels of knowledge, understanding, education, and skills among the community, limiting them to specific sectors of work.

It is undeniable that the widespread plundering in KPH Randublatung was partly due to the involvement of financiers who provided funding to the plunderers. The series of events surrounding the Reformation, in one sense, benefited these financiers by allowing them to expand their businesses. They could exploit the momentum of timber plundering to acquire large quantities of wood at low prices. This was further supported by the relationships between certain plunderers, financiers, and individuals within Perhutani. These relationships were established for various reasons, such as the intergenerational connections among plunderers, who were typically from communities living near the forest. They had worked in Perhutani for a long time, passing down the tradition through generations. Additionally, the reciprocal relationship between the three actors involved in plundering created a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship.

The aforementioned conditions did not deter the community from engaging in these activities due to their need for survival. The arrest of community members was considered commonplace rather than taboo. This made it difficult to reduce plundering activities due to the weak enforcement of laws and social sanctions. The concepts of legality and illegality, of breaking the law, were largely disregarded because, in reality, they desperately needed the natural resources from the forest to meet their basic needs.

References

- Antisipasi lanjutan amuk massa, Blora dapat pengamanan khusus. (July 8, 1998). *Wawasan*.
- Astraatmadja, R. (2002). *Tiga abad pencurian kayu di Jawa*. Retrieved July 5, 2021 from <http://www.arupa.or.id>.
- Hutan di Blora rusak akibat penjarahan sejak 1998. (March 8, 2023). *Suara Merdeka*.
- Jati terbaik di dunia dijarah rayah-pencurian kayu di KPH Randublatung sudah normal kembali. (October 8, 1998). *Wawasan*.
- KPH Randublatung (2000). *Monthly report of KPH Randublatung January-July 1999*. Blora: KPH Randublatung.
- KPH Randublatung amankan 35,8M3 kayu jati gelap. (July 19, 1998). *Kompas*.

- Kredit hutan rakyat akan berakhir. (February 23, 1998). *Pikiran Rakyat*.
- Kusumawati, P. S. E. (2011). *Blandong versus Perhutani: Konflik kehutanan di KPH Randublatung 1998-2003* (Undergraduate thesis). Department of History, Universitas Diponegoro, Indonesia.
- Penjarahan kayu jati dibekingi oknum aparat. (August 8, 2000). *Bernas*.
- Penjarahan melibatkan 100 orang lebih. (August 10, 1998). *Wawasan*.
- Perum Perhutani unit I Central Java. (1990). *Sekilas Perum Perhutani*. Semarang: Perum Perhutani unit I Central Java.
- Sarwono, S. W. (1992). *Psikologi lingkungan*. Jakarta: Grasindo.
- Simon, H. (2010). *Aspek sosio-teknis pengelolaan hutan jati di Jawa*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Tindakan keras tidak menyelesaikan masalah. (August 1, 1998). *Suara Merdeka*.
- Tujuh pejabat Perhutani Jateng dipecat karena terlibat penjarahan. (August 21, 1998). *Suara Pembaharuan*.
- Wulan, Y. C. et al. (2003). *Analisa konflik sektor kehutanan di Indonesia Tahun 1997-2003*. Jakarta: CIFOR.
- Zalaluddin, M., & Zuhdi, S. (2017). *Blandong dan perusakan hutan jati di Blora*. In International Young Scholars Symposium of Humanities and Arts 2017.