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Optimizing roads to limit environmental damage and maximize societal development in the Asia-Pacific

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When thinking of threats to the environment roads are probably not at the top of many people's list. They should be. Road expansion is occurring at a frightening pace across the globe with projections by the International Energy Agency estimating more than 25 million kilometers of paved roads alone will be built by 2050. That is enough to encircle the entire planet more than 600 times! Approximately 90% of these roads will be built in developing tropical and subtropical regions; the epicenter of global biodiversity and the host of some of the planet's most critical ecosystems. In the developing nations of Asia, for instance, in the next three years the total length of paved roads will double according to estimates by the Asian Development Bank. Part of this expansion will be as direct result of China's planned trillion dollars 'Belt and Road' and '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' projects which are expected to span more than 70 nations.

The current road-building spree poses a significant risk to environments globally as road development is known to equate to the opening of a 'Pandora's box' of environmental ills. In the Amazon, for instance, 95% of all deforestation occurs within 5.5 km of a road and for every 1 km of legal road length there is an additional 3 km of illegal road. Roads provide illegal loggers, miners and poachers with access to hitherto inaccessible forests. In Africa, this access has been implicated in the loss of two thirds of Africa's forest elephants in the last decade alone. Roads can also degrade environments by functioning as barriers to animal movement, facilitating landslides, and aiding the dispersal of pests and diseases just to name but a few of the known impacts.

Despite the severe impacts roads can have on environmental systems they are direly needed for the development of many tropical nations. Roads encourage more rural investment and give local residents better access to jobs, health care and schools. They also provide a cost-effective way to promote economic growth, encourage regional trade and provide access to natural resources and land suitable for agriculture. The need for road development in the tropics will only continue to increase given that by the year 2050 more than half the world's population will reside in the tropics including a staggering two-thirds of its young children (under 5 years).

To explore the ways to best balance environmental conservation and social development when planning and building roads, more than 200 of the Asia Pacific's sharpest minds from academia, not for profit conservation groups and governments met in Kuala Lumpur. The two-day conference in October entitled "Infrastructure in the Asia-Pacific: Promoting Benefits & Limiting Environmental Risks," was hosted by the Centre for Tropical Environmental and Sustainability Science from Australia's James Cook University. On the first day the conference attendees witnessed a wide array of road related presentations from some of the regions foremost experts discussing topics as diverse as road planning in Indonesia, elephant movement across roads in Malaysia, failed road development in Manus Island, and improving techniques for better conservationist engagement with the "dark side" of governmental road planners and engineers. The second day was allocated to workshops where teams of experts collaborated to develop practical approaches to some of the major topics related to roads in the Asia-Pacific. Thorny issues such as "ways to influence road development decisions at the planning stage" and "strategies to ensure lending standards of financial institutions optimize environmental outcomes and not just profit" were discussed and debated at length. These discussions were finalized through group presentations and audience contributions allowing attendees to decide how best to incorporate these outcomes into their often-unique regional circumstances.

At the end of the two days, a weary yet optimistic group began dispersing to their widely scattered locales with a new sense of purpose. This purpose can be best summarized by the initiator of the conference Distinguished Professor Bill Laurance who stated that "we desperately need to plan infrastructure and especially proliferating roads a lot better than we're doing at present. We have to learn to live with roads—and do everything we can to ensure that nature can live with them as well".
