Scientists Forecast ‘Godzilla’ El Niño Threat in 2026

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Forest Fires in Indonesia Risk Triggering Global Impacts on Climate and Biodiversity

Forests across Indonesia face increased fire risk this year as climate scientists forecast a strong El Niño event in 2026, with some discussions referring to it as a “Super” or “Godzilla” El Niño.

This phenomenon is expected to be intensified by a positive Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), potentially leading to a longer and drier dry season and significantly reduced rainfall across many parts of Indonesia. These two phenomena are projected to occur simultaneously starting in April 2026, raising serious concerns about increasing risks of forest and land fires with impacts that could extend beyond local landscapes to global climate systems.

The combination of these climate patterns causes rain clouds to concentrate over the Pacific Ocean while Indonesia experiences significant drought conditions. This situation is expected to persist throughout the 2026 dry season, from April to October.

In Ketapang, West Kalimantan, the conditions have been unseasonally dry since February 2026. Forest fires have already occurred, including fires that reached the YIARI restoration area within the Pematang Gadung Village Forest. This landscape has been undergoing restoration efforts to recover after severe fires in 2015 and 2017. While El Niño is naturally occurring, the extreme dry conditions are exacerbated by climate change, forest loss and land use changes. The current situation serves as a serious warning that the climate crisis is no longer a distant threat, but something already being experienced directly on the ground.

Dr. Karmele Llano Sanchez, CEO of YIARI, partner of International Animal Rescue, explained that for tropical forest landscapes in Kalimantan, the combination of El Niño, land-use change, forest degradation, and the broader climate crisis creates an extremely dangerous situation. *“Forests that have been cleared, converted, or affected by extractive activities become far more vulnerable to fire. The risk multiplies in areas that have lost natural forest cover and in peatland landscapes that are drying out. When fire emerges in such areas, the impact goes beyond the loss of vegetation—it accelerates global warming and has the potential to create even more extreme crises.”*

“*This is exactly what occurred during February and March in the Pematang Gadung Village Forest. As surrounding areas became dry and fuel loads increased, some land was burned for agricultural and plantation purposes. These fires then spread rapidly and expanded. We are seeing warning signs long before the peak of the dry season arrives, and this is deeply concerning. Conditions are already far drier than usual, even though the dry season has not yet reached its peak. When rain stops for longer periods, vegetation dries out, water sources shrink, and degraded landscapes become highly flammable,”* she added.

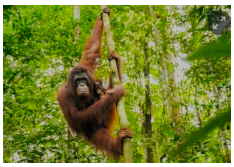
Thanks to quick action on the ground, the fires have been prevented from spreading further. A joint firefighting team consisting of local communities, government authorities, and YIARI staff, worked continuously under extreme heat and weather conditions. With approximately 45 hectares affected, these efforts successfully prevented the fire from spreading into larger forest areas with high conservation value.

Local communities served as the frontline in early detection and initial firefighting, while government support through coordination and resources, combined with YIARI’s field readiness, strengthened the overall response. Without this multi-stakeholder collaboration, the fires could have spread exponentially, threatening more habitats, increasing carbon emissions, and amplifying risks to public health and safety.

According to Karmele, the threat of forest and land fires is not only about the loss of trees or damaged landscapes. The impacts extend widely across biodiversity, climate systems, and human health. *“When forests burn, we lose habitats and push wildlife closer to extinction. Orangutans, sun bears, clouded leopards, and many other species that depend on tropical forests lose their living space, food sources, and protection. At the same time, smoke from fires threatens public health, particularly for children, the elderly, and vulnerable communities who must breathe hazardous air for days or even weeks.”*

International Animal Rescue’s CEO, Gavin Bruce, said: *“We have experienced these extreme El Niño events in the past and witnessed the devastation to nature and the wellbeing of the local people. We know what could be coming and we must act fast to do all we can to mitigate the threat. With the right*

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equipment and training, and by empowering the forest-edge communities, we can scale up the prevention efforts and do all we can to limit the destruction.

Past experience shows how severe the risks can become if such threats are not addressed early. The 2015–2016 El Niño event, one of the strongest on record, triggered massive forest fires across several regions of the world, including Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, fires during that period caused a severe haze crisis, becoming both an environmental disaster and a major public health emergency. In 2015 alone, YIARI rescued no fewer than 44 orangutans affected by the large-scale forest and land fires.

Karmele emphasized that prevention remains the most critical line of defence. *“In extreme conditions, not every fire can be completely prevented. However, with proper preparation, early monitoring, strong community involvement, adequate equipment, and rapid response in high-risk areas, we can slow the spread of fires, protect high-conservation-value forests, and reduce broader damage. Time is a crucial factor. Every day without preparedness increases the risk.”*

YIARI is currently strengthening a range of mitigation measures on the ground, including increased fire preparedness, patrols, monitoring of high-risk hotspots, and close collaboration with communities as the first line of defence across forest landscapes. Community-based initiatives such as *The Power of Mama* also play an important role in protecting nature, highlighting how women at the grassroots level have a vital role in safeguarding their territories from fire and environmental destruction. This approach is not only essential for protecting wildlife, but also for safeguarding public health, livelihoods, and the safety of communities living alongside fire-prone landscapes.

Experts agree that we can no longer treat these annual forest fires in Indonesia as routine seasonal disasters. Every hectare of forest burned represents a loss of biodiversity, an increase in carbon emissions, worsening air quality, and growing pressure on both people and wildlife.

The warning is now here. Prepare now or risk losing millions of hectares to fire this 2026 El Niño.

You can find out more and **help us prepare and prevent a catastrophic fire situation here:**
https://www.internationalanimalrescue.org/appeal/fire-crisis-fund

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