

Interpreting Forest Destruction Laws: A Legal Analysis of Prevention and Enforcement Mechanisms

I Nyoman Agus Pradnya¹, Supriyadi², Kadek Indrayanti³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Merdeka Malang

Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the interpretation and application of Law Number 18 of 2013 concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction, particularly the element of "organized," in judicial practice. The background to this study stems from the high rate of deforestation in Indonesia and the differences in judicial interpretations that have implications for legal uncertainty. This study employs a normative juridical method, utilizing a statutory regulatory approach and examining court decisions, specifically Decision Number 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.Wns and Decision Number 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.Sdr. The results show significant differences in the interpretation of the element of "organized." The Watansoppeng District Court Decision applies a strict grammatical interpretation, requiring a formal organizational structure. In contrast, the Sidenreng Rappang District Court Decision employs a more flexible teleological interpretation, emphasizing collective action and commercial objectives, even in the absence of a formal structure. Various factors, including legal interpretation approaches, socio-cultural contexts, moral considerations, and prior law enforcement practices, influence these differences. This article emphasizes the importance of standardizing the interpretation of the "organized" element to ensure legal certainty and effective law enforcement in forest protection.

Keywords: Legal interpretation, Forest destruction, Judge's decision, Organization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Forests play a vital role in maintaining environmental sustainability, supporting biodiversity, and serving as an economic and social resource for communities. In recent decades, Indonesia has experienced alarming levels of forest destruction due to illegal activities, including illegal logging, forest fires, and unauthorized land conversion (Sholehuddin, 2021). The latest data show that in 2023, Indonesia experienced 257,384 hectares of deforestation, an increase from the 230,760 hectares recorded in the previous year. The highest deforestation occurred in Kalimantan, with West Kalimantan recording the most significant loss of forest, at 35,162 hectares, followed by Central Kalimantan (30,433 hectares) and East Kalimantan (28,633 hectares). On the island of Java, although smaller in total, deforestation still occurred, particularly in hilly areas and conservation areas, such as in Blora Regency (Central Java), which lost around 1,200 hectares due to illegal logging and land conversion (Auriga, 2024). In fact, deforestation has been reported in the Wilis and Argopuro mountain areas of East Java due to illegal logging and encroachment on protected forest areas. This deforestation not only threatens biodiversity but also increases the risk of natural disasters such as floods and landslides, and contributes to local climate change.

To address this problem, the government issued Law Number 18 of 2013 concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction (Siswadi, 2021). This law aims to provide a strong legal basis for efforts to prevent and eradicate forest destruction, which is often carried out by individuals, groups, or even corporations in illegal ways that are detrimental to the environment, economy, and broader society (Nasir & Sodikin, 2025). This law contains important provisions regarding the definition of forest destruction as regulated in Article 1, number 21, which states that "forest destruction" is an action that results in the reduction, loss, or damage of forest functions permanently or temporarily and is characterized by actions carried out in an organized manner or for commercial purposes (Yusyanti,

2019). Meanwhile, Article 1, number 6 defines "organized" as an activity carried out by a structured group, consisting of two or more people, who act together at a particular time to destroy forests, excluding community groups living in or around forest areas who carry out traditional farming or logging for their own needs and not for commercial purposes.

This regulation is crucial because the element of "organization" is often used as an indicator for determining the severity of forest destruction crimes. However, in some cases, there are differing views at the judicial level regarding the interpretation of this element. Some judges have ruled that perpetrators are not classified as "organized," even though they consist of several individuals committing the act together, simply because they are not a legal entity or lack a clear formal structure. This difference in interpretation has led to legal uncertainty, rendering the application of Article 1(21) less than optimal and potentially resulting in disparities in decisions among courts.

The difference in interpretation of the element of "organized" can be examined in Decision Number 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN. The case was decided by the Watansoppeng District Court, where the panel of judges acquitted the defendants because their actions were deemed not to fulfill the elements in Article 1, Number 21, of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law. Conversely, in Decision Number 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN. According to the Sidoarjo District Court, the defendants involved in illegal logging were found guilty based on Article 1, Number 21 of the P3H Law. The Judge stated that the actions were carried out by a structured and organized group with commercial objectives, aiming to obtain profits from illegal forest products.

From the description above, this article examines and analyzes the application and interpretation of Article 1, Number 21 of Law Number 18 of 2013 concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction in Judge's Decision No. 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.Wns and 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR is the basis for the differences in interpretation given by the two judges.

2. METHOD

This research employs a normative juridical method to examine the norms outlined in Law Number 18 of 2013, specifically concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction. The study focuses on Article 1, paragraph 21, which concerns organized forest destruction, and Article 1, paragraph 6, which concerns commercial purposes. This research aims to examine how these two provisions are applied and interpreted in judicial practice, while also identifying potential differences in interpretation that could affect the effectiveness of law enforcement against forest destruction in Indonesia.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Application and Interpretation of Article 1, Number 21 of Law Number 18 of 2013 concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction in Judges' Decisions 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.Wns and 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.Sdr

Law Number 18 of 2013 concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction is a crucial legal instrument for forest protection in Indonesia (Pratiwi, 2015). Article 1(21) of the Forest Destruction and Management Law regulates forest destruction carried out in an organized manner and for commercial purposes. However, while this article provides a clear legal framework, the interpretation of the elements "organized" and "commercial purposes" remains crucial in practice and influences how the law is applied in cases involving forest destruction. This can be seen in two judicial decisions: 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS and 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR, which demonstrates apparent differences in the interpretation of Article 1(21) of the Law, particularly regarding the element "organized." This difference can create legal uncertainty, as these two decisions illustrate how differing interpretations of the same legal element can lead to varying outcomes in different courts. Decisions No. 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS and No. 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR demonstrates two different approaches to interpreting the "organized" element in Article 1(21) of the Forest Destruction Law. This distinction is crucial because the interpretation of this element can influence how the law is applied in forest destruction cases, ultimately impacting the justice received by defendants and the effectiveness of law enforcement aimed at protecting Indonesia's forests.

In Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS, the Judge applied a rigorous interpretation of the "organized" element. In this case, the Judge considered that the group responsible for the forest destruction did not fulfill the organized element because there was no evidence indicating the existence of a formal, legally registered, or recognized organizational structure. This interpretation emphasizes that a group involved in forest destruction must have an administratively structured organization, where there is a clear division of tasks, regulations governing the group's activities, and responsibilities are shared among the group's members. In this case, the Judge considered that a group that carries out collective forest destruction without a registered organization or a clear formal structure cannot be considered an organized group under Article 1, Number 21.

The application and interpretation of Article 1 Number 21 of Law Number 18 of 2013 concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction in Decisions 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS and 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR demonstrates significant differences in how judges interpret the elements contained in the article. In particular, the discrepancies in the interpretation of the element "organized" in the two decisions reflect the challenges in interpreting abstract concepts contained in laws and regulations. Through the lens of the Theory of Legal Interpretation and the Theory of Legal Certainty, the reasons for these differences can be identified, as well as their impact on justice and the effectiveness of legal application.

a. Interpretation of "Organized" in Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS

In Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS, the Judge interpreted the element of "organized" strictly by emphasizing the existence of a formal, registered, or legally recognized organizational structure, thus requiring a clear administrative system and rules. This interpretation reflects the application of grammatical interpretation that focuses on the literal meaning of the term "organized" (Triwijaya et al., 2020). However, this approach does not adequately account for the empirical reality of forest destruction, which is often carried out by groups lacking formal structures but with coordinated goals and patterns of action. Therefore, a systematic interpretation linking Article 1, number 21, to the overall goal of forest protection is more relevant, as it allows the organized element to be interpreted as encompassing planned collective actions with a common goal, even if they do not take the form of a formal organization.

In addition, by using historical interpretation, it can be found that the P3H Law was created to face the challenge of forest destruction carried out by informal actors, such as community groups that are not organized in formal structures, but are involved in illegal activities that damage forests (LR et al., 2019). Therefore, an overly strict interpretation of "organized" in this context has the potential to ignore the social objectives of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law, which is to prevent forest damage from various forms of groups that may not be administratively organized.

b. Interpretation of "Organized" in Decision 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR

In contrast, in Decision 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR, the Judge adopted a more flexible interpretation of the element "organized," emphasizing the collective actions and shared goals of groups involved in forest destruction, even without a formal, registered organizational structure. This interpretation is more oriented toward a teleological approach, focusing on the legal and social justice objectives pursued by the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law.

The teleological interpretation holds that groups without formal organizational structures can still be considered organized if they act together with a common goal, namely to profit from illegal forest products, because this approach prioritizes social benefits and environmental protection as the objectives of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction law. From the perspective of Lon L. Fuller's theory of legal certainty, a more flexible interpretation is considered in line with the principles of legal stability and transparency, because it allows the law to be understood, applied consistently, and remain relevant to social reality, thus maintaining public trust. However, this flexibility carries the risk of overinterpretation, because without clear boundaries, any group with similar economic interests could be considered organized, even though there is no real agreement or established work pattern in carrying out forest destruction.

3.2. Factors influencing the differences in Judges' interpretation of Article 1, number 21 of Law Number 18 of 2013 concerning the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction.

a. Legal Interpretation Approach

In this case, a striking difference is evident in the approach taken by the judges in the two decisions. In Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS, the judges tended to use a grammatical approach in interpreting the "organized" element. This approach emphasizes the literal meaning of the words written in the statutory text. According to this method, judges pay more attention to the word structure and meaning as stated in the legal text, without much consideration of external factors or the social context underlying the formation of the law (Sopian, 2018). In the context of Article 1, Section 21 of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law, the term "organized" refers to a group that must have a formal structure and be registered or legally recognized.

Using this approach, judges essentially assume that groups committing forest destruction can only be considered "organized" if they have a formal organization with a division of tasks, regulations, and administration that are legally valid. Therefore, if the group is not formally registered or does not have a legally recognized structure, it is deemed not to meet the criteria for "organized," even if it acts together for a common purpose. This is evident in judges' decisions that require precise and valid evidence of the formal organizational structure of groups involved in forest destruction. This interpretation can provide legal certainty for perpetrators and the public, due to its clear focus on the text of the law. However, this overly strict interpretation also risks overlooking the social reality on the ground, where many groups committing forest destruction often lack formal structures. However, they act collectively and share a common goal. Thus, this grammatical approach can create legal loopholes, where informal groups involved in forest destruction may escape punishment, even though their actions cause significant environmental damage.

On the other hand, in Decision 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR, the Judge adopted a more flexible and objective-oriented approach to the law, known as teleological interpretation. Teleological interpretation emphasizes the purpose or intent of establishing legal norms, as well as the social interests to be achieved through their application (Aulia, 2018). In this case, the Judge focused less on the formal structure of the group and more on the collective actions undertaken by the group for a common purpose, namely to obtain commercial profits from illegally harvested forest products. This interpretation prioritizes the social function of a group, namely, whether the group acted collectively with a clear purpose and destroyed the forest for the common good. Even though the group lacked a formal structure or was not legally registered, the Judge in this decision still considered them to be "organized" because they acted together and had a common purpose. With this interpretation, groups acting together, even without a formal organization, can be considered organized as long as they have a clear commercial purpose. This teleological approach reflects a more comprehensive understanding of the objectives of environmental protection and preventing forest destruction, which are at the heart of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Act. This approach provides greater scope for prosecuting groups committing forest destruction, even those without formal organizations, as long as their actions are organized and aimed at commercially profiting from illegal forest products. This aligns with the stated objective of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law, which aims to reduce large-scale forest destruction, without being limited by formal organizational criteria.

Although this approach is more flexible and oriented towards social justice, teleological interpretation also risks creating legal uncertainty if not carried out carefully (Qodar, 2004). An overly loose interpretation of the "organized" element could open up room for abuse of interpretation, allowing groups that are not truly organized or that do not meet other criteria to be still subject to punishment.

This distinction between grammatical and teleological approaches illustrates the differing priorities in interpreting the law. The grammatical approach used in Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS emphasizes a clear and recognized administrative structure, whereas the teleological approach is outlined in Decision

59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR prioritizes the legal objectives to be achieved, namely, environmental protection and the prevention of forest destruction by groups acting together, even without formal organization.

b. Social and Cultural Context

The social and cultural context in each region significantly influences the interpretation and application of the law, including those related to forest destruction, as regulated by Article 1(21) of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law (Irfani, 20 0). The law is never applied in a vacuum but is always influenced by the social, cultural, and value dynamics that develop within the local community. In this regard, regional social and cultural factors can influence how judges interpret a norm, such as the element of "organization" in cases of forest destruction.

In Decision Number 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS, which originated in Soppeng Regency, has a strong influence of local wisdom and cultural norms prevailing in the area. Soppeng Regency, known for its agrarian society and culture that prioritizes traditional social structures, tends to emphasize administrative formalities in interpreting the element of "organized." In this context, the Judge preferred to interpret "organized" as a group that must have a formally regulated and registered structure, such as a legal organization with legitimate administration and a clear division of duties. Differences in the interpretation of the "organized" element in forest destruction cases are influenced by the local social context of each region. In Soppeng Regency, judges tended to interpret this element formally, in line with a social structure that emphasizes legality and the existence of legal entities. Therefore, only groups with formal organizational structures are considered to fulfill the organized element as stipulated in Article 1(21) of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Act. Conversely, in Decision Number 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR from Sidenreng Rappang Regency, the judges applied a more flexible interpretation, emphasizing collective action and shared goals, even in the absence of a formal structure. This approach reflects local social wisdom that prioritizes cooperation and collectivity as characteristics of organization, particularly in the context of achieving shared economic goals.

Differences in the interpretation of the term "organized" demonstrate that the local social and cultural context has a significant impact on legal interpretation (Yasa et al., 20 1). Although Article 1(21) of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law contains similar norms, judges in Soppeng tended to emphasize the existence of formal organizational structures in accordance with local administrative traditions. In contrast, judges in Sidenreng Rappang emphasized collective goals and joint actions as a reflection of inclusive social wisdom. This phenomenon highlights the importance of understanding universal laws contextually, as local social and cultural values can influence judges' interpretations and lead to variations in their decisions. Therefore, a dynamic and contextual understanding of the law is crucial to ensure substantive justice and optimal legal protection for all parties.

c. Moral and Social Considerations

Moral and social considerations play a crucial role in legal interpretation, particularly in cases with broad impacts on society and the environment. Judges not only adhere to the text of the law but also assess the social impact of the defendant's actions and align their decisions with prevailing moral values, including the possibility of imposing harsher sanctions for environmental damage. This is evident in the difference in approach between Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS, which emphasizes formal organizational structures for legal certainty and social order, and Decision 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR, which places greater emphasis on the collective goals and social impacts of forest destruction, even without formal structures. Given that forest destruction directly impacts the lives of surrounding communities, judges may still impose penalties even if administrative requirements are not strictly met, in order to protect social and environmental interests.

d. The Influence of Previous Law Enforcement Practices

Previous legal practice often influences how judges interpret the law in subsequent cases. The law is not always applied in a vacuum; it develops through repeated judicial practice, and previous decisions often serve as a reference or precedent in interpreting similar legal norms (Muwahid, 20 7). In many cases, judges tend to follow

established interpretation patterns from previous decisions to maintain consistency, ensure legal certainty, and promote justice within the legal system.

One of the basic principles in the judicial system is consistency in the application of the law (Siallagan, 2016). This consistency is important so that the public can predict the legal consequences of their actions. By following previous decisions, judges strive to create clarity and stability in the application of the law. If a legal norm has been interpreted in a certain way in one decision, judges in subsequent cases are likely to follow that interpretation, unless there is a compelling reason to change. In the context of Article 1(21) of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law, if a previous decision interpreted the element "organized" in a certain way, judges in subsequent decisions may continue that interpretation to ensure legal certainty and respect for the principle of precedent. While precedent is important for maintaining consistency in decisions, differences in interpretation of the same legal norm can still arise due to differing judicial perspectives, evolving social values, and changes in the social and legal context. Under certain circumstances, judges may choose a more flexible interpretation if it is deemed more relevant and just. In cases of forest destruction, for example, the actions of a group without a formal structure can still be considered environmentally harmful and worthy of criminal punishment, even if they do not fully meet the strict administrative criteria.

Differences in interpretation that arise in law enforcement practice can create legal uncertainty if there are no clear standards for applying norms. If judges change existing interpretative patterns too frequently, it will be difficult for the public and legal practitioners to know what is expected of them. Legal certainty is compromised because there is no consistent pattern or precedent to follow. Conversely, if judges continue to follow precedent rigidly, even though existing norms can be interpreted more flexibly, it can lead to substantive injustice in law enforcement. Therefore, it is crucial to find a balance between following precedent and allowing for interpretations that are more relevant to social developments and community needs.

The differences in interpretation of Article 1, number 21 of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law in Decisions 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS and 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDRs are influenced by various factors, including the legal interpretation approach used by judges, the social and cultural context in each region, moral and social considerations, and the judges' personal perspectives. In Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS, the judges prioritized a stricter grammatical approach by demanding a formal organizational structure, while in Decision 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR, the judges were more flexible in assessing groups that acted collectively, even without a formal structure. Furthermore, the influence of previous law enforcement practices and differing views of judges on the objectives of law and social justice also influenced these decisions. These overall differences demonstrate that legal interpretation depends not only on the text of the law but also on social and cultural values and the judges' experiences, which must be taken into account to ensure fair and effective law enforcement.

4. CONCLUSION

The application and interpretation of Article 1, Number 21 of the Prevention and Eradication of Forest Destruction Law in Decisions 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS and 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR shows significant differences in interpreting the element of "organized," which has the potential to create legal uncertainty. The strict interpretation of this element in Decision 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS ignores groups without formal structures, while Decision 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDR is more flexible in accommodating groups that act together, even without formal structures. This difference highlights the importance of standardized interpretation to ensure fair and consistent legal certainty in law enforcement related to forest destruction. The differences in interpretation of Article 1, number 21 of the P3H Law in Decisions 84/Pid.B/LH/2020/PN.WNS and 59/Pid.B/LH/2022/PN.SDRs are influenced by various factors, including the legal interpretation approach used by judges, the social and cultural context in each region, moral and social considerations, and the judges' personal perspectives.

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