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How Families Keep a Forest the State Does Not See: Jongot amid Sumatra's Wetland Fires

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Abstract

Jongot are small family plots of fruit and timber trees on talang, the raised mineral land within the wetlands of Tempirai, South Sumatra, Indonesia. Residents call them hutan tue, old forest. Families live, gather, and bury their dead there. Nearby water bodies, called paye, provide clean water during drought, and during the 2026 fires residents reported that their Jongot remained unburned while surrounding gardens burned. Yet the records examined do not identify Jongot as a distinct forest category, and interviewed owners reported having no formal land title. The authors' concern arises from this gap between Jongot's importance to residents and its limited formal recognition. Written from an engaged position and drawing on interviews, focus groups, participatory mapping, observation, and documents from 2025 and 2026, the article examines how residents understand Jongot as forest, how families sustain it without formal recognition, and what functions it serves for local people and the wetland landscape. Using the authors' framing of the everyday politics of space, it makes three arguments. First, Jongot is a forest space: a de facto family forest without a de jure title. Second, residents hold their ownership through everyday practices rather than formal protection. Third, Jongot is a biocultural space, yet urgent household needs, uneven transmission of knowledge, changing livelihoods and land use, and recurring fires threaten its continuity. The findings highlight the need to protect Jongot. They also offer lessons for other wetland communities: maintaining diverse trees on raised ground, providing refuge during floods, and protecting nearby water sources used for daily needs and firefighting, through governance arrangements suited to local conditions.

1. Introduction

During fieldwork in Tempirai in 2025, the authors visited Jongot, small family-owned plots of fruit and timber trees on raised land within the wetlands. Family graves stood among the trees, and wooden houses provided places to rest and gather. Residents explained that relatives living elsewhere return to Tempirai during the fruit season to gather at the family's Jongot. The authors also observed residents collecting water from nearby paye, small water bodies, during drought. In 2026, owners reported that their Jongot had remained unburned while surrounding gardens burned (Wijaya, 2026c). These uses and experiences reveal Jongot's important place within South Sumatra's wetland landscape, where forest land and nearby waters support family life and provide refuge during floods and resources for firefighting.

Jongot consists of mixed stands of fruit trees, timber trees, palms, and other useful plants on talang, raised mineral land within the Penukal River landscape (Ismi, 2026; Wijaya, 2025c). They recall successive generations of owners and identify ancestral graves to explain their families' connections to these places. Some families describe more than a century of inheritance (Ismi, 2026). These accounts establish Jongot's importance as inherited forest, although they do not provide precise establishment dates or surveyed areas.

Talang forms part of a wider wetland landscape that includes seasonally flooded swamps (lebak), deep pools (lebung), paye, lakes, and rivers. In Tempirai, Jongot occupies talang that remains dry when adjacent lowlands flood. Families maintain these forest plots within a landscape increasingly used for cultivation. Rubber has been planted on talang since around the 1920s, while oil palm expanded from the early 2000s (Wijaya, 2025c, 2026b). Residents associate these changes with greater fire risk during drought (Wijaya, 2026b), and research in other wetlands of southern Sumatra links land-use change to repeated fires (Chokkalingam et al., 2007).

Reports from South Sumatra in 2026 describe extensive burning and severe smoke pollution (ANTARA, 2026; CNA Indonesia, 2026; Tasmalinda, 2026). In Tempirai, residents described fires spreading through rubber and oil-palm gardens towards Jongot, prompting relatives and neighbours to use nearby water to defend the forest plots (Wijaya, 2026b, 2026c). Tempirai was selected because its inherited forests, surrounding wetlands, changing land uses, and recurring fires provide a setting for examining how residents sustain Jongot and its biocultural functions.

Jongot's importance to residents raises questions about how these places are counted and recognized. Residents described how the Kerio formerly recorded Jongot under the marga administration. The transition to village government followed Law No. 5 of 1979 and the abolition of marga government in South Sumatra in 1983 (Republik Indonesia, 1979; Wijaya, 2025c). Published accounts link this institutional change to the end of Jongot registration, while residents continue to acknowledge family ownership (Wijaya, 2025c). The next question is therefore how families sustain Jongot when the institution that recorded it no longer operates.

Public discussion has emphasized Jongot's place in family identity and Musi cultural heritage (Wijaya, 2025a, 2025c). This article examines how residents maintain its existence through everyday practices and how its functions connect family life with the surrounding wetlands. Drawing on research on anthropogenic forests (Fairhead & Leach, 1996; Michon et al., 2007), the politics of forest space (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001), everyday politics (Scott, 1985; Bayat, 1997; Kerkvliet, 2009), and wetland landscapes (Sayer et al., 2013; Chokkalingam et al., 2007), it asks three questions:

1. How do residents understand Jongot as forest, and how does that understanding relate to formal forest categories?
2. How do families sustain Jongot in the absence of formal recognition?
3. What functions does Jongot serve for local people and the wetland landscape?

The authors use the everyday politics of space as their framing to examine how families sustain Jongot through everyday life, inheritance, care, taboo, and negotiations over sales. The article argues that Jongot is a forest space, that families sustain it through everyday practices rather than formal protection, and that it is a biocultural space whose continuity is threatened. Its functions include providing a living space, sustaining knowledge of plants and their uses, offering habitat for animals, supplying water, providing refuge during floods, and supporting families' defence against fire. These

functions offer lessons for other wetland communities, which can develop governance arrangements suited to their local conditions.

2. Anthropogenic Forest, Everyday Politics of Space, and Wetland Landscape

Three bodies of literature guide the analysis: anthropogenic forests, the everyday politics of space, and wetland landscapes.

Research on anthropogenic forests shows how people shape forests by retaining existing trees, planting useful species, and caring for vegetation over generations (Fairhead & Leach, 1996; Wiersum, 1997; Levis et al., 2017). At a global scale, Ellis et al. (2021) estimate that people had already shaped most of the Earth's land 12,000 years ago, so that many places now treated as natural have long histories of use. In Indonesia, trees and cultivation practices also connect family histories with land rights, while mixed agroforests combine planted species with existing woodland (Peluso, 1996; Gouyon et al., 1993; Michon et al., 2007). Whether such places count as forest, however, depends on institutional definitions and territorial designations. Technical thresholds of vegetation, area, and land use affect which wooded places are counted as forest (Sasaki & Putz, 2009; Putz & Redford, 2010; Chazdon et al., 2016). Forest categories are also a political construction: states territorialize forest by mapping and classifying land, designating it as forest, and deciding whose rights receive recognition (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001). This distinction helps situate Jongot as a forest maintained by families whose practices do not necessarily fit formal categories.

Understanding how these forests persist also requires attention to the people who maintain them. Studies of access and authority explain how social relations enable people to use resources and sustain property claims (Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Sikor & Lund, 2009). Family arrangements can restrict sales to outsiders, although relations among relatives can also lead to land loss (Michon et al., 2007; Li, 2014). Studies of everyday politics grew from Scott's (1985) work on the weapons of the weak, the quiet, everyday forms through which peasants resist those who extract from them. Kerkvliet (2009) widens this view: he distinguishes everyday politics from official politics and advocacy politics, and resistance becomes only one of its forms. Everyday politics consists of people supporting, complying with, modifying, evading, or resisting rules over resources through ordinary actions that are rarely organized or described as political. The concept explains the form of such politics but says little about the places over which it is conducted. Work on territoriality supplies this spatial dimension. Sack (1986) describes territoriality as controlling people and resources by classifying an area, communicating its boundary, and enforcing control over access. In forest studies, territoriality has mostly been examined as a state practice, as noted above, yet it can also be exercised from below. Peluso (1995) shows how communities in Kalimantan drew sketch maps to reclaim forest territories absent from official maps, and Hall et al. (2011) show how people are excluded from land through regulation, force, the market, and legitimation, not only through state law. In urban studies, Bayat (1997) describes the quiet encroachment of the ordinary: the silent, patient, and prolonged advance of ordinary people on space and resources

held by the powerful. These studies treat everyday spatial politics mainly as resistance, counter-claim, or encroachment. Less attention has been given to people who quietly keep a space they already hold.

Jongot's continuity also needs to be understood within its wetland landscape. Landscape approaches examine connections among land uses and the people who shape them (Sayer et al., 2013). The Ramsar Convention allows designated wetland sites to include islands within them (Ramsar Convention, 1994). This provides a basis for considering dry talang as part of a wider landscape of swamps, pools, paye, lakes, and rivers. Research in southern Sumatra shows how land-use change and repeated fires affect wetland livelihoods (Chokkalingam et al., 2007). Research on biocultural diversity treats biological and cultural diversity as linked parts of one social-ecological system (Maffi, 2005), and biocultural approaches to conservation aim to sustain both together (Gavin et al., 2015; Bridgewater & Rotherham, 2019). In this article, a biocultural space binds together a living space, a history, local knowledge, and biodiversity. Studies of domestic forests identify benefits for biodiversity and water regulation, while research on tree islands demonstrates biodiversity gains in oil-palm landscapes (de Jong, 1995; Michon et al., 2007; Zemp et al., 2023). Together, these studies support examining Jongot's functions through its relationship with surrounding land and water.

The authors bring these three bodies of literature together in a framing they call the everyday politics of space: the ordinary, often unspoken practices through which people claim, mark, use, and defend a space and decide who belongs to it. The framing directs attention to three dimensions that correspond to the three research questions. The first is recognition: how residents recognize a space as forest, whether or not state categories do. The second is sustaining practices: the everyday practices through which people keep the space as forest, including care, inheritance, the transmission of knowledge, and rules over use, access, and sale. The third is connection: how the space is linked to a wider space, supporting the surrounding landscape and depending on it in turn.

The three dimensions are related. Recognition authorizes practice: where formal title is absent, community recognition makes family practices legitimate, and recognizing a claim also confirms the authority of those who recognize it (Sikor & Lund, 2009). Practice reproduces recognition: gatherings, graves, care, and rules keep a space recognized, so recognition becomes fragile when practices weaken. Connection gives the space its value and also its vulnerability: because the space supports and depends on the wider landscape, threats to that landscape become threats to the space itself. The framing thus links how Jongot persists despite its unregistered status to how it functions in the wetland landscape. The article's contribution is to show, through the everyday politics of space, how families quietly keep an anthropogenic forest space that state categories do not record, and how that space connects to a wetland landscape.

3. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative case-study design (Yin, 2018). Fieldwork took place in Tempirai, Penukal Utara District, PALI Regency, South Sumatra, from July to October 2025. Members of the research team

returned in September and October 2026 while accompanying journalists reporting on fires. Tempirai comprises four villages: Tempirai, Tempirai Utara, Tempirai Timur, and Tempirai Selatan. The four villages cover a reported total of 139.04 km² and include raised land and extensive wetlands (Fig. 1).

Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight key informants and lasted 60–120 minutes. Participants included Jongot owners from different generations, customary leaders including a former Kerio official, and younger residents. Three focus groups involved 20 participants in total, including all eight key informants interviewed individually. The discussions lasted 90–150 minutes and used mapping and timelines to discuss ownership and landscape change. A follow-up telephone interview with one of the key informants, a community leader, was conducted in October 2026. Observation documented Jongot plots, graves, maintenance, water collection, and communal activities. Descriptions of durian and duku (a tropical fruit related to langsat) harvest gatherings came from interviews and documentary sources. Documentary material included family documents, spatial-planning material, and statistics. Seven Mongabay Indonesia reports published between February 2025 and October 2026 were used as secondary sources. Information on plant uses, wildlife, and springs in Section 4.3 draws mainly on these reports and is attributed to them. Media reports are widely used as data in social research, with known risks of selection and description bias (Earl et al., 2004). The Mongabay reports were used because they record residents' statements and events, including the 2026 fires, that occurred partly outside the main fieldwork period; they were compared with interviews and field observations where both were available. Residents' statements obtained from these reports are attributed to the published articles and distinguished from interviews conducted by the research team.

Members of the research team accompanied journalistic reporting in 2025 and 2026. Further identifying details concerning the overlap between the research team and the authorship of the published reports are withheld for anonymous review and disclosed to the editors through the submission system. These reports were published before this article was drafted and are cited as published documents. The team supports the preservation of Jongot. The Mongabay reports are treated as secondary sources even where authors accompanied the journalists. Some reports and follow-up observations arose from the same encounters, so they are not treated as independent confirmation. The authors' statements quoted in those reports are excluded as evidence. The findings distinguish residents' accounts, journalists' descriptions, and the authors' observations. This involvement provided access to sites and discussions but may also have drawn attention towards accounts supporting preservation. The analysis therefore also considers urgent sales, uneven involvement among generations, and changing livelihoods. The everyday politics of space is the authors' analytical framing, informed by their involvement and their concern for Jongot's continuity. The analysis makes this position explicit while distinguishing the authors' interpretations from residents' statements and field observations.

For the first research question, residents' descriptions and observations of Jongot were compared with forest definitions and available documents. For the second, interviews and observations were examined for how families sustain Jongot in the absence of formal recognition, including inheritance, everyday

care, and decisions over use, inheritance, and sales within the family. For the third, mapping discussions, observations, interviews, and secondary sources were analysed to examine Jongot's functions for local people and the wetland landscape, including daily water use, refuge during floods, and protection against fire. Table 1 summarizes the data sources and their relation to the research questions.

Table 1
Data sources and participant groups

Participant group / source	Method	Quoted participants / coverage	Focus	RQ
All interview participants	Semi-structured interview	8 key informants	Jongot owners, customary leaders, and younger residents; all eight also participated in the focus groups. Subgroup rows below identify participants quoted in the article.	1, 2, 3
Cross-generational Jongot owners	Semi-structured interview	3	Age and ancestry of Jongot, graves, management, inheritance	1, 2
Customary leaders (incl. former Kerio official)	Semi-structured interview	1	Kerio register, recognition after 1983	1, 2
Younger residents	Semi-structured interview	1	Age and origin of Jongot, sale within the family, knowledge of Jongot and its transmission	1, 2
Jongot owners	Focus group discussion	1 group (see note)	Ownership, family responsibilities, landscape relations, and change; topics reviewed across all three groups	1, 3
Younger residents	Focus group discussion	1 group (see note)	Ownership, family responsibilities, landscape relations, and change; topics reviewed across all three groups	2, 3
Participants from different stakeholder groups	Focus group discussion	1 group (see note)	Ownership, family responsibilities, landscape relations, and change; topics reviewed across all three groups	1, 3
Jongot sites and households	Participant observation	Jul–Oct 2025	Structure of Jongot, landscape position, gatherings and practices	1, 2, 3
Accompanying journalists after the 2026 fires	Participant observation	Sep–Oct 2026	Fire, paye, condition of Jongot, residents' accounts	3
Documentary data on Jongot	Document study;	7 Mongabay Indonesia reports	Composition and age of Jongot, landscape functions,	1, 3

Note: RQ = research question. Interview subgroup counts identify only participants quoted in this article. The focus-group topics summarize discussions across the three groups.

Participant group / source	Method	Quoted participants / coverage	Focus	RQ
	secondary media sources	(secondary sources); family and planning documents	2026 fires, legal status	

Note: RQ = research question. Interview subgroup counts identify only participants quoted in this article. The focus-group topics summarize discussions across the three groups.

Thematic analysis proceeded in two stages. First, the authors coded material concerning trees, ancestry, ownership, inheritance, sales, water use, fire, documentation, and landscape change. They then used these themes to address the three research questions, comparing participants' descriptions of rules with their accounts of actual decisions and practices. Interviews, observations, and documents were compared while checking whether different sources referred to the same events or provided different perspectives. Interpretations were discussed with informants and colleagues. Interviewees are identified by role, while public figures cited from published reports retain their published names. Interview quotations and field notes appear in English alongside the Musi or Indonesian wording.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Jongot as an anthropogenic forest

The research team's field notes record a first impression of a Jongot during fieldwork in 2025:

I saw a house, and many tall trees in the Jongot. It felt like a forest.

— Field notes, Tempirai, 2025

(Original: "Saya melihat rumah, banyak pohon tinggi-tinggi di jongot. Rasanya seperti hutan.")

This section examines how residents' understanding of Jongot as forest relates to formal definitions.

Vegetation and residents' accounts of planting, retained woodland, and care help explain Jongot as an anthropogenic forest. Ismi (2026) describes dense, layered tree cover visible in drone images and reports more than 50 plant species in a Jongot at Talang Lebung Jauh. Field observations and residents' accounts identify durian, duku, and rambutan, a tropical fruit with a hairy rind. They also identify cempedak (Artocarpus integer), a fruit related to jackfruit; jengkol, a tree grown for its edible seeds; sugar palm; tampui (Baccaurea macrocarpa), also known as tampoi, a tropical fruit with edible pulp; and rukam (Flacourtia rukam), a fruit tree also known as Indian prune. Published reports identify timber trees, including meranti, a group of tropical hardwood trees, and rengas, a local name for timber trees (Ismi, 2026; Wijaya, 2025c). A community leader gave a similar picture of this diversity in a follow-up telephone interview:

At the very least, if I am not mistaken, there are more than 30 kinds of trees.

— Telephone interview, community leader, Tempirai, October 2026

(Original: “Paling dikit itu ada, kalau ndak salah, 30 lebih lah jenis pohon.”)

His estimate concerns trees, whereas the figure of more than 50 includes other useful plants. Both are residents’ estimates rather than botanical inventories. Together, these sources describe mixed-species stands managed for several purposes.

Many of these trees are old. Residents describe them as planted or kept by earlier generations (Ismi, 2026), so the age of the trees is tied to family history. Families trace Jongot through several generations. A former secretary to the Kerio recalled records of 150 plots, some described as several centuries old (Wijaya, 2025c). Residents described plots as small, often around half a hectare or less. The heir of a Jongot in Talang Lebung Jauh described several generations of inheritance, although published reports differ on whether he represents the fourth or fifth generation (Ismi, 2026; Wijaya, 2025c). These accounts document remembered continuity rather than exact establishment dates.

Residents often explain the age of a Jongot by naming the generations who inherited it and identifying relatives buried there. One resident said:

I do not know when it began. It has been there a long time, since our puyang [ancestors]. That is why Pak Tony’s Jongot contains his ancestor’s grave.

— Interview, younger resident, Tempirai, October 2025

(Original: “Ndak ngerti kapan, la lamo itu, sejak puyang kami dah ado, makanya di Jongotnya Pak Tony ada makam puyangnyo.”)

Ancestral graves provide visible evidence of a family’s connection to a Jongot. Graves without dated inscriptions cannot establish the plot’s exact age, but residents use them to explain its history. Section 4.2 examines how the presence of deceased relatives shapes family decisions over the land.

One younger resident described a possible origin of Jongot:

I don’t really know about the old days. Probably, before rubber was planted, it was all still forest. Then part of the forest was left standing and planted with fruit trees, and that became Jongot.

— Interview, younger resident, Tempirai, October 2025

(Original: “Kalau dulu itu saya kurang tahu. Kemungkinan, sebelum ditanami karet, semuanya masih berupa hutan. Lalu, sebagian hutan disisakan dan ditanami pohon buah-buahan, yang kemudian menjadi jongot.”)

This account suggests a possible process of retaining woodland and adding fruit trees. Although it does not establish how every Jongot began, it resembles the middle of Wiersum's (1997) continuum, where people protect existing trees and add useful ones, and the village forest islands that Fairhead and Leach (1996) found had been enriched by residents rather than left over from a lost forest.

Residents call Jongot hutan tue, or old forest, because they associate it with inherited trees and earlier generations. Published accounts also connect it to fertile ground and family history (Ismi, 2026; Wijaya, 2025a). The term describes both a forest place and its significance to the family.

Jongot also belongs to a wider group of inherited fruit-tree forests in Indonesia, alongside the fruit-tree groves of West Kalimantan and the agroforests of Sumatra discussed in Section 2 (Peluso, 1996; Gouyon et al., 1993). The closest parallel is the simpukng of the Dayak in East Kalimantan: managed secondary forests of fruit, rattan, bamboo, and timber that are mostly family-owned, inherited across generations, and governed by customary rules (Mulyoutami et al., 2009). What distinguishes Jongot is its position: it stands on dry talang within a wetland and is tied to nearby paye and springs, a relationship examined in Section 4.3.

Table 2
Local understandings and formal forest categories

Definition	Criterion	Assessment in this study	Reason
FAO (2020)	Area > 0.5 ha; trees > 5 m; canopy cover > 10%; not predominantly agricultural use	Height and canopy criteria met; individual plot area not met	Field observation and drone imagery (Ismi, 2026) indicate tall trees and dense canopy that meet the vegetation criteria; height and canopy were not measured. Individual Jongot plots of ≤ 0.5 ha do not meet the area threshold. Classification of mixed fruit and timber stands also depends on predominant land use.
Law No. 41/1999 forest definition	Tree-dominated ecosystem	Meets the general ecosystem definition	Jongot consists of mixed, tree-dominated stands maintained and used by families.
Law No. 41/1999 hutan hak	Forest on land held under a land right	De facto family forest without a de jure title	Family ownership is acknowledged locally, but interviewed owners reported having no formal land title.
Local understanding	Hutan tue (old forest) inherited through families	Recognized as forest	Residents identify Jongot through inherited trees, family histories, graves, and community acknowledgement.

Table 2 identifies where Jongot meets forest criteria and where formal thresholds create difficulties. Jongot's tall trees and dense canopy meet the FAO height and canopy-cover requirements, but an individual plot of 0.5 hectares or less does not meet its requirement of more than 0.5 hectares. Adjacent plots on a talang may together exceed that threshold, although their treatment as a single forest area

depends on how the definition is applied. Jongot's mixed fruit and timber trees also require distinguishing a domestic forest from a fruit-tree plantation or an agricultural system excluded by the FAO definition. Under Indonesian law (Republik Indonesia, 1999), Jongot fits the general definition of a tree-dominated ecosystem, while formal recognition as hutan hak concerns the land rights attached to it. Families hold and manage Jongot in practice, but interviewed owners reported having no formal title. Jongot is thus a de facto family forest without a de jure title.

The analysis shows why forest categories are a political construction. Height, canopy, minimum area, predominant land use, and documentary recognition determine which aspects of Jongot become visible in formal classification. Residents recognize Jongot as forest through its trees, inherited history, and acknowledged ownership, even though individual plots do not meet the area threshold or the legal requirement of a land title. The absence of a separately named Jongot category does not itself establish that all of its tree cover is excluded from broader statistics. The central distinction is that Jongot exists as an anthropogenic forest maintained through family practices, despite the lack of formal title reported by its owners. Much of the discussion of forest definitions concerns thresholds that count plantations or degraded land as forest (Sasaki & Putz, 2009; Putz & Redford, 2010). Jongot shows the reverse problem: small, mixed-species forest plots made by people may not appear as a distinct category at all. Like the forest islands of Kissidougou (Fairhead & Leach, 1996), they are recognized in local claims before they are recognized in official records. Residents' recognition of Jongot as forest, even without state recognition, is the first dimension of the everyday politics of space.

4.2 Maintaining Jongot through everyday practices

Families maintain Jongot through inherited obligations, community recognition, and repeated acts of care. Interviewees describe these practices as continuing after the Kerio recording system ceased to operate.

Residents and published accounts describe how the Kerio once recorded Jongot ownership, locations, trees, and family connections. This practice must be situated within the transition from marga, a customary territorial administration, to village government. Law No. 5 of 1979 on Village Government provided the national framework for this transition (Republik Indonesia, 1979). In South Sumatra, marga government was abolished in 1983 through Governor's Decree No. 142/KPTS/III/1983, as part of implementing this law (Wijaya, 2025c). Wijaya (2025c) links the end of Jongot registration to this institutional change. Interviewees described registration as no longer operating, while ownership continued to be acknowledged locally.

In the past, Jongot ownership was registered, so there was a record of who owned each plot. It is no longer registered, but people still recognize the ownership.

— Interview, senior customary figure, October 2025

(Original: "Dulu didaftarkan, yang punya jongot itu didaftar, sehingga tercatat. Kalau sekarang tidak tercatat lagi, tapi pengakuan itu tetap ada.")

Community recognition continues through family memory, elders' testimony, and everyday discussion. Residents described asking elders to confirm ownership when questions arise.

The institution is gone, but the Tempirai community still recognizes ownership. Even without a certificate, when someone owns a Jongot, the whole community acknowledges it.

— Interview, senior customary figure, October 2025

(Original: "Secara institusi memang hilang, tapi pengakuan tetap ada, dari masyarakat Tempirai. Walaupun tidak ada surat, kalau ada yang punya jongot, diakui seluruh Tempirai. Itu pengakuan.")

Residents reaffirm ownership by naming family plots, visiting them, harvesting their fruit, and acknowledging other families' claims. This recognition makes family practices legitimate. Three practices sustain Jongot across generations.

The first practice is gathering at the family's Jongot during the fruit season. Interviewees explained that relatives who had moved to Palembang, Jakarta, Bangka, or Malaysia return to Tempirai to gather there. They cook together and show children trees planted by earlier generations. These gatherings take place around the durian harvest in November–January and the duku harvest in February–March. One owner explained how residents identify a Jongot with the family that owns it:

A Jongot tells you which household or family owns it. You can ask the same about the Jongot next to it: which family owns that one?

— Interview, female Jongot owner, Tempirai, October 2025

(Original: "Kalau jongot itu, ini isi rumah siapa, keluarga siapa? Yang sebelah situ punya keluarga siapa?")

The second practice is keeping Jongot within the family. A female Jongot owner described the prohibition against selling it:

Jongot must not be sold. If it is sold, it may bring what we call merkoh: someone may fall ill, and even their children may become ill too.

— Interview, female Jongot owner, Tempirai, October 2025

(Original: "jongot tu ndak boleh dijual, kalau dijual agek pacak merkoh istilahnya, ada yang sakit sampai ke anak anaknya melok sakit")

Her account expresses a taboo against selling Jongot, reinforced by the belief that merkoh, or misfortune, may affect the seller and their children. One family also associated damage to a large tree in Pak Toni's Jongot with merkoh. Sales within the family are permitted under specific conditions, discussed in Section 4.4.

Family graves help explain why Jongot must stay within the family. Graves were visible among the trees in one owner's Jongot, and he explained why the plot mattered:

Many of our family are buried here. So this Jongot is not just a place for fruit; it is also a place for our family.

— Interview, male Jongot owner, Tempirai, October 2025

(Original: "Di sini banyak keluarga kami dimakamkan. Jadi jongot ini bukan cuma tempat buah-buahan, tetapi juga tempat keluarga kami.")

The third practice is caring for the trees and the places where Jongot stands. Owners describe occasional maintenance rather than intensive cultivation: they clear vegetation around trees, make cuts in the bark, and expose trees to smoke, practices they believe encourage fruiting, and otherwise leave much of the vegetation to grow (Ismi, 2026). This light management resembles the domestic forests described by Michon et al. (2007). According to published accounts, earlier generations chose where to establish Jongot by planting seeds of cempedak or asam kandis, a local name for sour Garcinia fruit, and observing their growth to identify suitable, unflooded ground (Ismi, 2026). Some Jongot lie near springs called ulu talang, water sources at the head of a talang. A customary leader described a belief that damaging the forest around these springs would bring misfortune (Ismi, 2026). In this account, the prohibition protects both the trees and the nearby water source.

The everyday politics of space becomes visible in how relatives uphold and negotiate the taboo against selling Jongot: the person caring for Jongot cannot decide its future alone, and urgent household needs must be weighed against the family's commitment to retaining it (Kerkvliet, 2009). The taboo also draws a boundary around who may enter, harvest, and acquire the space. By limiting buyers to relatives, it controls access to Jongot in the way Sack (1986) describes territoriality, and it excludes outsiders through family legitimacy rather than state regulation (Hall et al., 2011). These practices are neither resistance in Scott's (1985) sense nor encroachment in Bayat's (1997) sense, and they are not indifference: families do not oppose the state or advance on space held by others, but quietly keep land they already hold and adjust their own rules over it. They make up the second dimension of the everyday politics of space.

4.3 Jongot in the wetland landscape

Within the landscape of talang, lebak, lebung, paye, lakes, and rivers introduced in Section 1, residents name many talang containing Jongot, including Talang Lebung Jauh, Talang Paye Bakung, Talang Turunan Gajah, Talang Tanjung Eran, and Talang Sebetung. Several Jongot may occupy the same talang (Wijaya, 2025c).

Households combine work on land with fishing in swamps and rivers. Wijaya (2025c) describes rubber gardens, upland rice fields (ume), and Jongot located near one another. Residents also identify paye within or beside gardens and Jongot. Published accounts describe them as small swamps, cut-off river

sections, or ponds dug along streams for fish traps (Ismi, 2026; Wijaya, 2026b). Here, paye refers to these small water bodies in the talang landscape.

Participants used mapping discussions to describe where Jongot stands in relation to talang, rivers, lakes, and surrounding wetlands. Figure 2 redraws the community map to show these relationships more clearly. Jongot occupies dry talang, while wet ground lies between the talang. Residents placed clusters of Jongot on some talang and fewer on others. The map presents residents' understanding of the landscape and is not to scale.

For the families who own them, Jongot provides places to stay and gather. A wooden house or hut (pondok) may stand among the trees, offering rest after work in rubber gardens or ume and a meeting place during harvests (Wijaya, 2025c). Ismi (2026) describes overnight stays in a raised hut in Talang Lebung Jauh, while Wijaya (2025c) reports older residents choosing to stay in their Jongot. These accounts bring together habitation, family graves, and forest land.

The trees that surround these houses also hold knowledge about plants. The heir in Talang Lebung Jauh reported more than 50 plant species in his Jongot and said that almost all of them could be used: as medicine, as food from fruit and leafy vegetables (lalapan), and for household needs such as cooking utensils, tools, and building materials (Ismi, 2026). Meranti trees support his raised hut, and he taps sugar palm daily. Before rubber was planted, residents used Jongot to collect honey and tap sugar palm, and they set fish traps (bubu) in nearby paye (Ismi, 2026). As Section 4.2 shows, children learn about trees during harvest visits. Knowing which plants serve which purposes is therefore part of what families inherit with the plot.

Residents use water from springs and paye near Jongot for everyday needs. Springs near talang supply water during dry periods (Ismi, 2026), and nearby paye provide clean water for residents during drought. A research team member observed residents collecting this water during the 2025 dry season:

The paye is a source of clean water during the drought. I saw it myself. Residents were taking water from the paye in jerrycans of about five or ten litres. The water was very clear.

— Field notes, Tempirai, 2025

(Original: "Paye itu sumber air bersih saat kekeringan, saya lihat sendiri. Warga mengambil air di paye pakai jeriken, kira-kira 5 atau 10 liter. Airnya jernih sekali.")

During the 2026 drought, an heir in Talang Lebung Jauh also reported using paye water for bathing and washing (Wijaya, 2026c).

Jongot also provides habitat for animals. According to the heir in Talang Lebung Jauh, Jongot was once home to Sumatran tigers, elephants, deer, mouse-deer, squirrels, monkeys, and many birds; today mainly monkeys and birds remain (Ismi, 2026). Fruiting trees attract these animals, and residents describe a benefit for cultivated fields: one rice farmer said that Jongot fruits ripen when upland rice is filling, so

monkeys and birds feed on the fruit instead of her rice (Ismi, 2026). These accounts describe Jongot as remaining habitat in a landscape where much forest has been converted, similar to the tree islands that support biodiversity in oil-palm landscapes (Zemp et al., 2023).

Residents also connect Jongot to the wetland beyond the talang. Springs at the head of talang (ulu talang), which residents protect through the prohibition described in Section 4.2, flow with clear water throughout the year into periodically flooded wetlands such as Danau Burung, described as the largest peat-swamp ecosystem in Tempirai, covering about 1,250 hectares (Ismi, 2026). Ismi (2026) also reports that streams from Jongot carry organic matter and water of neutral pH into acidic, nutrient-poor swamps, where fish spawn and animals and people find clean water, and that Jongot remains moist when the surrounding peat dries during drought. How Jongot and its springs affect the water and ecology of the surrounding wetland requires further research.

Jongot's position on talang also matters during floods. When rivers overflow in the rainy season, the water covers much of the surrounding land but does not reach Jongot, so many Jongot have been used as places to live (Ismi, 2026). Talang thus provides dry ground for houses and a place of refuge, and published accounts describe animals moving onto talang and nesting there as water rises (Ismi, 2026). In the dry season, the same landscape faces the opposite threat: fire.

Residents' accounts of the 2026 fires show how families acted to protect Jongot. They described fire spreading through surrounding rubber and oil-palm gardens and approaching family plots (Wijaya, 2026b, 2026c). One heir reported:

Thank God, our Jongot did not burn, nor the other Jongot here.

— Jongot heir, Talang Lebung Jauh, quoted in Wijaya (2026c; authors' translation)

Another heir reported that his Jongot remained unburned while part of his garden burned (Wijaya, 2026c). Wijaya (2026b) describes visits to Talang Tanjung Eran and Talang Sebetung in Tempirai on 6 September 2026, when no burned sites were found in the areas visited. Members of the research team accompanied the reporting, so these descriptions overlap with their observations.

Residents explained these outcomes through the condition of the trees, nearby water, and their efforts to stop fire. One said that Jongot vegetation did not dry out like rubber or oil palm (Wijaya, 2026c). At Talang Turunan Gajah, five family members reportedly carried water from a partly dried paye for two hours before neighbours arrived with a pump (Wijaya, 2026b). Knowledge of nearby paye helped families act, and neighbours joined when more labour or equipment was needed. Chokkalingam et al. (2007) describe how repeated fires in the wetlands of southern Sumatra turned swamp forest into fire-prone vegetation. Within a similar fire-prone landscape, Tempirai residents describe defending small forest plots with water from nearby paye. Unlike tree islands planted for restoration (Zemp et al., 2023), these plots remain because families already own them and act to protect them. The space that families defend therefore includes the water beyond the plot boundary.

These relationships make Jongot a biocultural space within the wetland landscape, beyond its value as a family inheritance. This is the third dimension of the everyday politics of space: the forest space that families maintain is connected to the wider space, the wetland landscape, which it supports and on which it depends. This connection also explains why changes in the wider landscape threaten Jongot, as Section 4.4 shows.

4.4 Threats to the continuity of Jongot

Residents' accounts describe three pressures on the continuity of Jongot: sales to meet urgent household needs, uneven involvement among younger relatives, and a changing landscape.

First, families sell Jongot under pressure of urgent expenses, including medical treatment, funerals, and education. Such sales require agreement within the extended family:

If we need a lot of money, that is where we get it—if nothing else can cover it, we are forced to sell. If it is a real need, the family cannot be angry. [The proceeds] are shared.

— Interviews, male and female Jongot owners, October 2025

(Original: "Kalau butuh duit banyak, dapatnya dari situ; kalau tidak tertutupi yang lain, terpaksa jual. Kalau kebutuhan, keluarga tidak bisa marah. Dibagi.")

A younger resident explained who may buy:

It is true that a Jongot can be sold with the agreement of the whole extended family. The seller is the family member who looks after the Jongot, but the buyer must also still be part of that family.

— Interview, younger resident, Tempirai, October 2025

(Original: "Memang iya, jongot bisa dijual atas persetujuan seluruh keluarga besar. Yang menjual dari keluarga yang mengurus jongot itu, tetapi yang membeli juga harus masih bagian dari keluarga tersebut.")

The rule allows a different relative to acquire the plot but not an outsider, so a sale can meet an urgent need while keeping Jongot within the family. This matches the domestic-forest arrangements noted in Section 2, where rights pass within a group but not to outsiders (Michon et al., 2007). It differs from highland Sulawesi, where tree crops turned common land into individual plots and some people lost land to their own kin and neighbours (Li, 2014). The rule does not, however, prevent unequal holdings among relatives, and the longer-term effects of such sales on care and land use require further study.

Second, continuity depends on younger relatives learning where Jongot lies and what caring for it involves. Participants described some descendants who had migrated as less familiar with family plots, and harvest visits as a chance to introduce children to inherited land. A senior customary figure expressed concern about declining knowledge:

People no longer feel drawn to these practices, and their knowledge is beginning to fade. Younger people prefer what is practical, although some are still interested.

— Interview, senior customary figure, October 2025

(Original: “Orang tidak terpanggil lagi hal-hal seperti itu; pengetahuannya sudah mulai berkurang, generasi muda lebih suka praktis—tapi ada juga sebagian yang masih menginginkan.”)

Some younger people remain interested, but others are drawn away. If fewer relatives know and care for Jongot, the community recognition on which it depends also weakens.

Third, families care for Jongot within a changing landscape. Because Jongot is connected to the wider space, changes in that space bear on Jongot itself. Residents report expanding rubber and oil-palm cultivation, recurring fires (Section 4.3), reduced fishing opportunities, difficulties obtaining water during drought, and declining rubber output (Wijaya, 2025c, 2026b, 2026c). Across Indonesia’s oil-palm zone, Li and Semedi (2021) show how plantation expansion has cost former landholders their land and livelihoods. Residents also attribute poor fruit harvests in the 2025–2026 season to rain and wind (Wijaya, 2026a). One owner explained why a household cannot rely on Jongot fruit alone:

If we only wait for the fruit harvest, we cannot make a living. We have many other sources of income.

— Interview, male Jongot owner, October 2025

(Original: “Kalau cuma menunggu buah, tidak bisa makan. Banyak sampingan kita.”)

Families therefore value Jongot even when its fruit provides too little income, but looking after it still requires time, labour, and money that these pressures make scarce.

The findings support two priorities: protecting existing Jongot and adapting its lessons to other wetland landscapes. Protection in Tempirai should support the families who maintain Jongot and the surrounding land and water on which its uses depend.

Public discussion has proposed recognizing Jongot through hutan hak, spatial planning, cultural heritage, biodiversity parks, or ecosystem conservation arrangements (Wijaya, 2025b, 2025c). These proposals involve different administrative requirements and require further assessment. Internationally, other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) recognize areas outside protected areas that are governed and managed in ways that achieve long-term in situ conservation of biodiversity, together with associated ecosystem functions and cultural, spiritual, and socio-economic values (Convention on Biological Diversity, 2018), and they are increasingly promoted as a way to recognize conservation beyond formal protected areas (Gurney et al., 2021). OECMs may be governed by communities and private owners, so recognition need not change family ownership. The definition recognizes the kind of biocultural values documented in this article. Recording family claims, lineage histories, and graves would provide a basis for discussion. Families should participate in deciding how

recognition affects inheritance, sales within the family, and responsibilities, so that formal protection supports the arrangements through which they maintain Jongot.

For other wetland landscapes, the lesson lies in the relationship between forested talang and the surrounding waters described in Section 4.3, rather than in the trees alone. The authors propose that the Jongot model could be adapted beyond Tempirai, including in residential neighbourhoods in both wetland and urban settings. A small plot planted with 30–50 tree species and cared for collectively could become a forest space in the sense used in this article: a place that residents recognize, mark, and maintain, even if it falls below formal area thresholds. The number is comparable to the more than 30 tree species estimated by a community leader and the more than 50 plant species reported in one Jongot (Ismi, 2026). In cities, such plots could also count towards green open space, which Indonesian spatial-planning law requires to cover at least 30 per cent of urban areas (Republik Indonesia, 2007). Carbon schemes could support such plots, as well as existing Jongot, provided that they respect and adapt to collective and family traditions and ownership.

Such plots need not reproduce Tempirai's ancestral graves, beliefs about misfortune, or rules limiting sales to relatives. Those practices explain how Jongot has persisted locally, but other communities may sustain comparable functions through their own customs, ownership arrangements, or collective governance. Diverse trees, shared care, suitable ground, and connection to nearby water should guide the adaptation.

5. Conclusion

This article makes three claims. First, Jongot is a forest space: residents recognize it as hutan tue, an old forest made and kept by their ancestors, even though state categories do not record it. It is a de facto family forest without a de jure title. Second, families sustain Jongot through everyday practices rather than formal protection. After the Kerio stopped registering ownership, families continued to mark it through graves, inherited trees, and mutual acknowledgement, and to control access through the taboo against selling to outsiders. Third, Jongot is a biocultural space that binds together a living space, family history, local knowledge, and biodiversity (Maffi, 2005; Gavin et al., 2015). Urgent household needs, uneven transmission of knowledge, changing livelihoods and land use, and recurring fires threaten its continuity, so it needs protection. The everyday arrangements that sustain it can also inform other wetland communities.

The article's contribution lies in the debate on the everyday politics of space. Research on political forests explains how states make forest space from above (Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001), and studies of everyday spatial politics emphasize resistance and quiet encroachment (Scott, 1985; Bayat, 1997). Jongot shows another form: families quietly keep a forest space they already hold, through recognition, sustaining practices, and connection to a wider landscape, without state records. Protecting such spaces therefore requires recognizing the family arrangements and wetland waters on which they depend.

The study is limited to one locality and to the participants, sites, and events documented in 2025 and 2026. It does not establish the prevalence of internal sales, the rate of Jongot loss, or a uniform pattern of generational change. The community map records residents' knowledge of the landscape rather than surveyed distances and areas. Accounts of plant uses, wildlife, and water rely mainly on published reports and residents' statements, as the study examines biocultural relationships rather than ecological measurements. Greater attention to gender, relatives living elsewhere, and differences in authority within families would deepen the analysis of who participates in decisions and who bears the work of care. Comparative research could examine similar inherited forest spaces in South Sumatra, known locally as ghepangan, kampungan, benuaran, and kebun risan—different regional names for inherited forest spaces (Wijaya, 2025a, 2026a). Such comparisons would also test the three dimensions of the everyday politics of space and their relations, which this article derives from a single case.

Declarations

Author Contribution

A.R. and Y.Z. collected interview, focus group, and observational data in 2025. Z.F.S.Z. conducted participatory landscape mapping and recorded field observations. A.R., Y.Z., and Z.F.S.Z. accompanied Mongabay Indonesia reporting in 2026. T.W., a journalist with Mongabay Indonesia, reported on Jongot in 2025 and 2026, conceived the idea of adapting the Jongot model to other settings, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. All authors contributed to the analysis and writing, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version.

Data Availability

The published documentary sources analysed in this study are cited in the reference list. Qualitative research materials include interviews, focus group discussions, field observations, and participatory mapping. These materials are not publicly available because they contain potentially identifying information about participants, family ownership, and culturally sensitive places. Requests for access to anonymised materials may be directed to the corresponding author and will be assessed in accordance with participant consent and confidentiality requirements.

Clinical trial number: not applicable.

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Figures

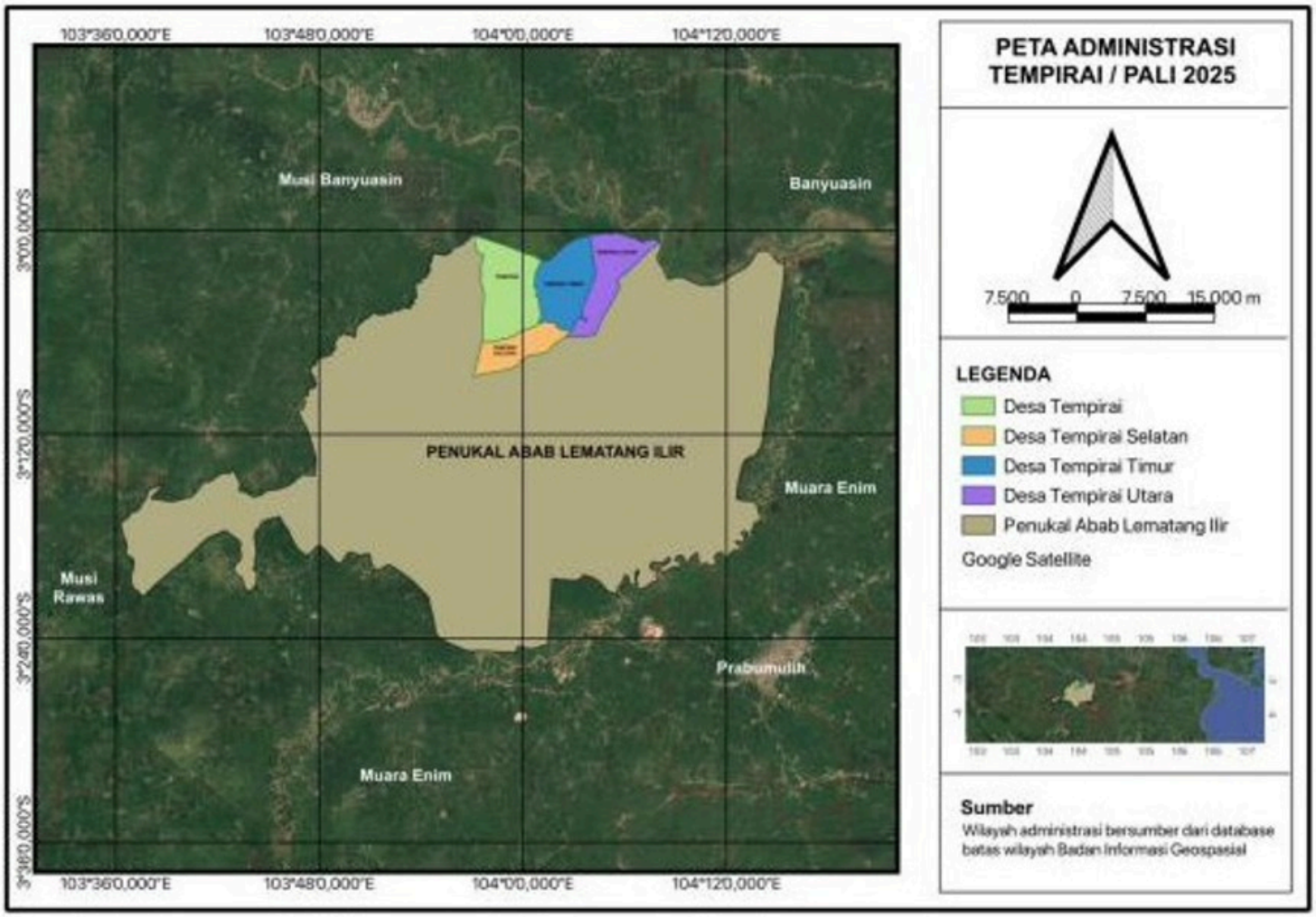


Figure 1

Administrative map of Tempirai, PALI Regency, South Sumatra. Source: Spatial Information Agency, 2025

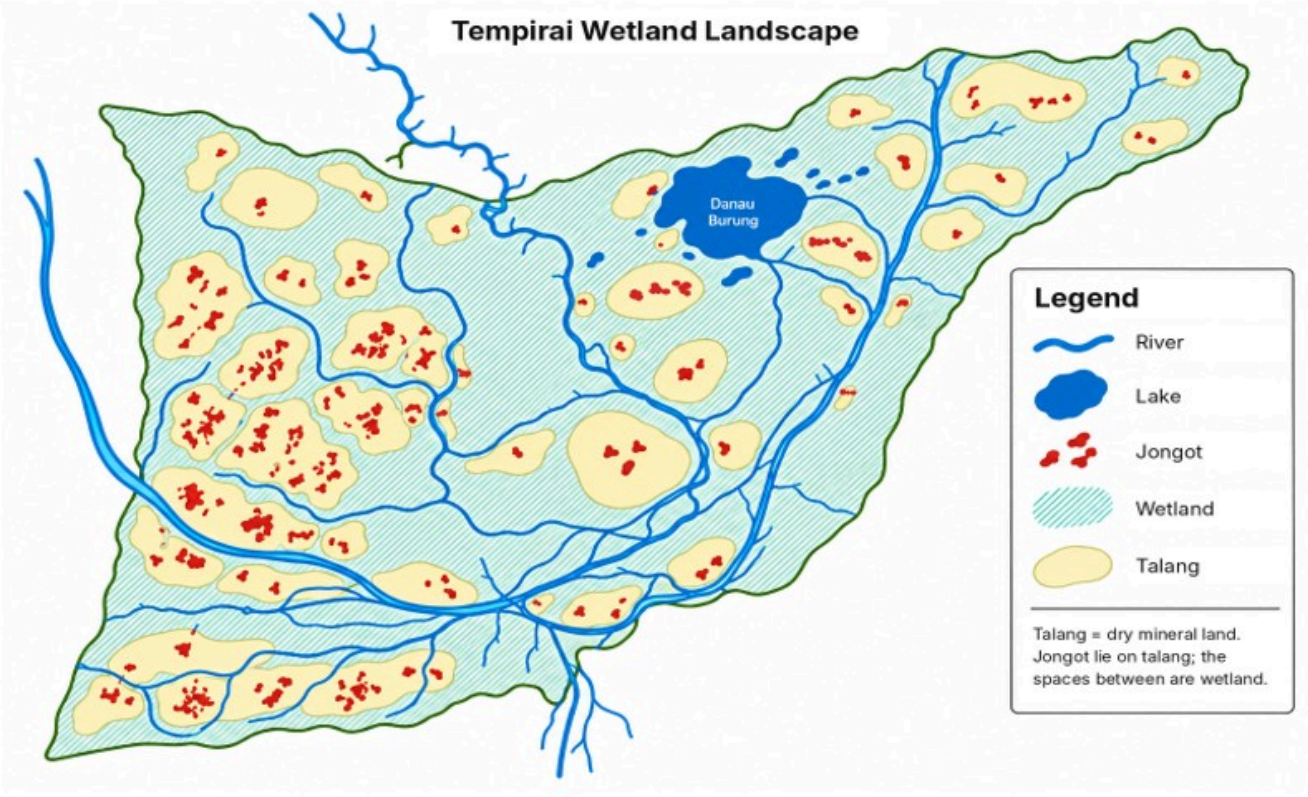


Figure 2

Position of Jongot within the Tempirai wetland landscape, based on participatory mapping in focus group discussions, October 2025. Sketch map, not to scale.