

What is the best form of development? Who decides?: The Case of Borneo, Malaysia

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On March 31, 1987, a group of 2,500 Penan tribe members began an eight-month blockade of one of the primary logging roads into the tropical forest of Borneo, one of the Malaysian islands. After sending the government numerous letters and declarations of protest against the logging activities in their traditional homeland, the Penan realized their concerns were not being heard and decided to take the matter into their own hands. Armed with blowguns, members of this indigenous hunting and gathering group erected barriers and placed behind them men, women, and children, young and old. In defense, the Malaysian government brought police and military forces into play, who dismantled the road blocks and arrested ninety-one individuals, including both Penan and other critics of this regime. The ensuing legal battle uncovered the contradiction of the government's land-use policies and the illegality of their actions when attempting to dismantle the blockades, since the Penan were arrested for trespassing on state land even though the roads they blockaded went through their own traditional hunting grounds. The courts actually found in favor of the Penan, "since logging concessions had been granted by state authorities without a clear demarcation of customary lands, the land rights of thousands of [indigenous people] had, by definition, been compromised." Most of the protesters were therefore acquitted on the basis that they were lawfully protecting their customary rights.¹ Since this time, the Penan have not only become an intense embarrassment to the Bornean government, but also have been transformed by non-governmental organizations into "icons of resistance for environmentalists worldwide."²

Presently, tensions are mounting. International groups are increasingly becoming involved, both on the part of the logging companies, who have hired Chinese mercenaries to harass the Penan, and environmental justice groups who are threatening to bring the Malaysian government before the Human Rights Board of the United Nations for their treatment of the Penan. Before the situation escalates any farther, a mediation team from the United Nations has entered the situation to conduct a meeting of all parties involved. In attendance are the Eastern Penan, who vehemently oppose any logging practices; the Western Penan, who have acquiesced not only to the timber interests, but to the government's resettlement plans; Friends of the Earth (Malaysia), the most vocal environmental NGO; and of course, Malaysian government officials.

The Local Setting

Borneo is the third largest island in the world, and is covered with lush tropical rain forest. These rainforests have very high biodiversity and are considered to be the oldest and richest terrestrial ecosystems on Earth. About one-third of its plant species are found no where else on Earth, including thirty birds and thirty-nine species of terrestrial mammals.³

¹ Davis, Wade and Thom Henley. Penan: Voice of the Borneo Rainforest. Malaysia: S. Abdul Majeed & Co. 1990. Pp 133-134.

² Brosius, J. Peter. "Endangered People: Environmentalist Response of Indigenous Knowledge," Human Ecology Vol. 25, No. , (1997). Pp 48.

³ Human Relations Area File, Inc. North Borneo, Brunei, Sarawak. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, County Survey Series, 1956.

Due to the topographical variation and the abundance of biodiversity, the forests of Borneo are home to many different indigenous groups. One of them is the Penan. While many different tribes make up the Penan, the two major distinctions are the Western and the Eastern groups. For centuries the Penan have inhabited the forests, hunting and foraging for their needs. At the forefront of these practices, is the Penan concept of *molong*. The Penan consider themselves the guardians of the forest. They use it for their own needs, and when they die, they leave it for future generations to use in the same manner. To effectively do this, they engage in *molong*, which roughly translated, refers to a sustainable use of forest products. When harvesting a certain plant, for instance, the Penan never cut into the root system, which would kill the plant, nor do they cut all they need from the same clump, instead they take two stalks from a clump of seven and then move on to the next, allowing the plant to resprout. Another aspect of their stewardship practices, is to claim certain plants to preserve them for future usage (Denslow & Padoch, 207).

Traditionally, the Penan are nomadic hunters and gatherers. In fact, out of the 100,000 nomadic groups on Borneo, the Penan are the only group of which some members still roam the forest. Unfortunately, these traditional hunter-gatherers account for a very small percentage of the population. Ninety-five percent of the Penan are now either settled or semi-settled. For decades, different governments have attempted to draw these groups out of the forest, not only to exert more extensive control over them, but also to allow logging companies better access to the upland forest regions. In order to provide these relocated people with jobs, thousands of acres of peat marshes on the coast of the island have been drained to allow for the production of rice. The government has also provided these groups with longhouses in which to live permanently, or until they find new housing (Brosius, 1997, 50).

Since eighty percent of the island is covered by forests, timber is a valuable resource. Major logging extraction began in the 1950's after Malaysia gained its independence. Once state governments were in place, control of the forests and forestry practices were handed over to the individual states. At first the governments granted all logging concessions to foreign countries in hopes of receiving more tax revenues and foreign trading rights. However, the initiative shifted and many states began granting the concessions to domestic timber companies only. Later on, they outlawed the exportation of raw logs, spurring the construction of numerous sawmills. Presently, these mills control much of the industry, simply because they provide many jobs, in a time when Malaysia is plagued by unemployment. If the governments decrease the amount of operating mills, they will lose thousands of jobs. Another major problem with the Malaysian system is that logging concessions are granted for twenty or thirty year stretches, providing no incentive for the logging company to be interested in the future of the forest. "If one is to get rich, one must do it quickly." Since Malaysia has started logging, sixty percent of their primary forest has been cut. The lowland regions have been the heaviest hit. Some foresters have attempted to harvest a variety of species from the rain forest without causing damage to the surrounding primary growth, however, none have really been successful. For this reason, the disappearance of all Borneo's lowland rain forest by the end of the century is a serious possibility. The government has conservation regulations in place, however they are not very successful due to poor implementation.⁴

⁴ Denslow, Julie Sloan and Christine Padoch. People of the Tropical Rain Forest. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. Pp199-202.

The Western Penan

In general, the Western Penan have agreed to relocation initiatives. Tu'eu Pejuman, one of the representatives for the Western Penan, is now 43 years old and can still remember what it was like living in the forest. "We would travel for days hunting the *babui* (wild pig) while the others would gather the *sago* (a type of palm). I no longer recall how to process the sago though. My father has died since that time, and there is only one man still living with us in the longhouse who remembers the old ways. He still has his blowgun, with which he used to kill the *gibbon* (monkey). In the past we have tried making more, but found we had forgotten how." Tu'eu now works the rice patty the government gave to him, and when he can, he works with the timber companies building roads into the forest.

Tu'eu is content with his life as are many of the others living in this resettlement camp. While they have lost many of their traditional ways, they now have incomes and permanent housing. Their children are now given the opportunity to attend school and there are health care facilities in the area. Many of their children hear stories of the nomadic life and laugh. They do not believe that their parents could have grown up like that, and at times they are embarrassed. Tu'eu agrees. It seems like ages ago when he roamed the forest.

When officials contacted the Western Penan, Tu'eu arranged a meeting with his people in which they discussed their feelings on the current situation. They feel they have benefited from the logging companies' presence. While they have undergone many changes in the past decades, they do not feel their new way of life is any less valuable. They have also heard the critiques that the Eastern Penan and the environmental non-governmental organizations have presented regarding logging. While Tu'eu does not want to see his homeland completely deforested, he feels these other groups are being rather extremist in arguing that logging should be stopped. He would agree that more regulations must be put in place to make a more sustainable system, but finds it rather hypocritical for the Eastern Penan to suggest the government should give up this important revenue. The fact is, in order for Borneo to remain economically stable, they need the money derived from exploiting forest resources. The Penan have done this since the beginning of time. Traditionally they have survived through the exploitation and quasi-management of such resources as *sago*, *rattan*, and other endemic species. It is not realistic to think of the Bornean rain forest as some sort of Eden. By doing this both the Eastern Penan and the NGO's are discounting many of the compromises available for this situation.

The Western Penan want the upheaval around them settled. In preparation for this meeting, Tu'eu and his people have identified three areas of their current situation with which they are unhappy, and a final point surrounding the more general issues affecting everyone – logging. The areas they want improvement in include: (a) safety measures and current labor practices of the timber companies (b) health care and facilities and (c) housing. Finally, they have brought suggestions for the present logging fiasco in their country (d).

- (a) Malaysia has enacted no regulations on the operation of the logging companies. Along with no guidelines pertaining to logging methods, these companies are not required to have any type of safety measures. Many of the men in Tu'eu's village have been injured and worse yet maimed due to these practices.
- (b) While modern health care facilities have been quite beneficial to the Western Penan, medicine arrives too late, people are misdiagnosed and incorrect medication is administered. A little under

half of their children suffer from malnutrition. Tu'eu and his community are very displeased with this.

- (c) Finally, while the longhouses do provide shelter for all, they are overcrowded and dirty. Many of the Penan become sick from parasites and fungus because too many live in these houses. The government has also placed members of different indigenous groups in the same buildings. "We are generally friendly to these people. In fact there has been an increase in our people marrying theirs, however, sometimes tempers flare due to the cramped spaces. Some of them also believe that we have taken their traditional homeland. We try to explain that we haven't, that the government has provided us with these longhouses, however, the government isn't here for them to be angry with, so they are angry with us."
- (d) As far as logging practices go, the Western Penan want to see more sustainable practices being put in place. While they believe that it is o.k. for the government to continue logging, mass deforestation of Borneo is unacceptable. Tu'eu feels it is important for the government to regain control over this industry, implement the regulations they already have on the rule books, research new initiatives, and listen to the suggestions of the Penan, "We have lived and survived off the forest for centuries. Government officials should sit down with the Penan, and listen to our traditional practices of forest management – they may learn something."

In conclusion, Tu'eu attends this meeting, with three basic points to his agenda: the first is to advocate for improvement in the present condition of his community; the second, is to discuss logging in Borneo including some more sustainable forms of it; and finally, he hopes to speak to officials about their resettlement initiative. While it has worked for his people, resettlement obviously is not what the Eastern Penan want, therefore, the government should look into a more accommodating form of this project, perhaps simply leaving certain people be.

The Eastern Penan

Unlike their counterparts, the Eastern Penan have not accepted the development plans of the Malaysian government. They are the ones who sent the declarations of protest, blockaded the roads, and catalyzed international support. Dawat Lupung is 29 years old, and is the spokesman for the Penan. He comes to this meeting with passion, anger, and hope. His hope rests on the chance that the government may finally be willing to listen to what the Penan have to say and that they will change their development plans.

In the declaration of intentions they sent to the government, the Eastern Penan (with help from Friends of the Earth (Malaysia)) wrote (Davis & Henley, 134):

We, the Penan people of the Tutoh, Limbang, and Patah Rivers regions, declare:
Stop destroying the forest or we will be forced to protect it. The forest is our livelihood. We have lived here before any of you outsiders came. We fished in clean rivers and hunted in the jungle. We made our sago meat and ate the fruit of trees. Our life was not easy but we lived it contentedly. Now the logging companies turn rivers to muddy streams and the jungle to devastation. Fish cannot survive in dirty rivers and wild animals will not live in devastated forest. You took advantage of our trusting nature and cheated us into unfair deals. By your doings you take away our livelihood and threaten our lives. You make our people discontent. We want our ancestral land, our livelihood, back. We can use it in a wiser way. When you come to us, come as guests with respect.

After years of having the government ignoring their pleas, the Penan gave up their trust in the officials. They gave up their willingness to compromise because the officials rarely came to speak with them, and when they did, they treated the Penan as though they were children and unable to think or act logically.

Dawat understands the importance of the revenue logging creates for Borneo. He is not against development in Borneo. He and his people even agree that logging is even necessary to an extent, however, he wants to be left alone. “Cut the right bank of the river, but leave the left for us. Leave us be. Do not uproot our sago or kill the babui. We want to see the land preserved so that we can stay in our traditional homeland. We are not opposed to change, but we want to choose development based on our needs” (Davis & Henley, 136). The Eastern Penan are receiving a lot of criticism for this view, especially from the Friends of the Earth (Malaysia). The fact is that although Dawat and his people are very appreciative of the help FoE and the other organizations are giving them, sometimes the Penan become suspicious about who FoE is really fighting for. The Penan respect and want to protect their homelands, but they do not expect logging to end completely – that would be naïve. The problem they are having with FoE is that while they say they are fighting for the Penan, in actuality it seems these activists are constructing an image of the Penan in order to make the public more sympathetic to FoE’s fight to stop all logging activities in Borneo.

The Eastern Penan do not expect the Malaysian government to halt all logging, however an indisputable fact is that the island’s natural heritage is being deforested at an unsustainable rate. Dawat is coming to this meeting with various suggestions for the officials. Primarily, if the government would just start implementing the regulations they already have in place, come of the most harmful practices will stop. In addition, there are many other alternatives to broaden the country’s economic base. The government has only concentrated on the revenue they can derive from timber. There are countless fruits, vegetables, herbs, and plant species which would no doubt receive a good market price – they are delicious and on top of that exotic, an automatic edge over the bland fruit some American students get in their college cafeterias. Another alternative is agroforestry, a program presently implemented by Sumatra, an Indonesian neighbor. In this program, the government could transform abandoned and neglected swidden agricultural fields into primary and secondary forest, simply by planting different species. Once the agroforests reach maturity, one need only extract the valuable products, such as rubber, dammar (a type of resin), and bamboo.⁵

In Dawat’s eye, the only way the state can persuade the Penan to agree with their forms of development, is to resolve the current conflicts surrounding logging practices in Borneo. “If the [state] authority really wants to help us, keep them [the loggers] from cutting all our trees... That is what is necessary for us to live. If they really want to help us, preserve our land for *molong*, for our rattan, for our pig, for our game. That would show that the authorities care about us. Because this is our only way of life” (Denlow & Sloan, 208).

Friends of the Earth (Malaysia)

⁵ Foresta, Hubert de and Genevieve Michon. “Creation and Management of Rural Agroforests in Indonesia: Potential Applications in Africa,” Tropical Forests, People and Food: Biocultural Interactions and Applications to Development Vol. 13. Paris: The Parthenon Publishing Group, 1993. Ch. 60.

Wade Davis has been working with and for the Penan for five years now. He became interested in the Penan during his investigation of logging practices in Borneo. As an environmentalist, Wade had been astounded at the amount of trees being felled every year on this island, and upon further exploration, Wade found a group on the island just as passionate about the destruction as he was – Friends of the Earth (Malaysia). For years this group has been protesting the massacre of the tropical forests on Borneo. They wrote letters and arranged community meetings and informational sessions to stimulate the interest of other Malaysians, and more importantly other Borneans, in their cause. The real breakthrough in their work, however, was when they initiated contact with the Penan. Since that time they have worked closely with the Eastern Penan – lived with them, went on hunting raids, processed sago. As they got to know them, FoE and especially Wade fell in love with this group of non-violent people, whose biggest transgression is *see hun* or ‘the failure not to share’. Since that time, FoE has educated the Penan on their rights, gathered international support for their cause, and further educated them on the treasures and wonders the tropical forest has within it.⁶

Although the protection of the Penan is an important objective of FoE, their main cause is to fight for the protection of the Bornean forest. Whole forest ecosystems have already been eliminated from Borneo. The extinction and consequent decline in biodiversity is immeasurable. Not only has the cutting created concern, but one of the biggest threats to this ecosystem is the resulting threat and occurrence of fires. Some even worry that the logging of the forests has turned Borneo into a ‘fire-climax grassland’. Due to the droughts plaguing the island, these areas are highly susceptible to large forest fires. No one knows what kind of impact droughts and high temperatures will have on the vegetation due to the biodiversity of the island. We also know nothing of the forest’s resiliency to fire. In addition to these negative impacts, erosion is a major consequence of the deforestation occurring on Borneo. Presently, timber companies are cutting huge swaths across once forested areas, over which runoff is greatly increased and water penetration is reduced causing massive erosion. Erosion in turn undermines tree’s roots and causes even further topsoil loss. The eroded material then is brought down to rivers during intense rainstorms, creating shallower beds and increasing the chances for the rivers to override its banks. Rivers are not only flooding with more frequency now, but also are becoming increasingly polluted. Presently, there is only one river in Borneo that remains unpolluted and that is because it is protected in a national reserve. FoE feels we cannot afford to discount these consequences. The rain forests of Borneo must be protected (Brookfield, Harold et al, 83-86).

A week before they came to this meeting, members of FoE sent a secret memo to Wade Davis. He carries it in his pocket at today’s meeting. A section of it reads:

... As tragic as the circumstances became surrounding Dawat’s construction of the road blockades. The outcome is phenomenal. Never before has the Malaysian government sat down with this group, and especially not with us. We can not only advocate the Penan’s point of view, but we can also finally stand up and fight for the forest. It still astounds me that these people can go on cutting down this forest. Do they not realize that they are destroying species we do not even know exist? Do they recognize that with every tree they cut they endanger the lives of another insect or mammal or fish? And if they don’t care about them, don’t they realize the catastrophic consequences which their short-sighted actions have on our communal

⁶ Davis Wade, “The Penan: Community in the Rainforest,” *IN Contex #29*, (12 May 1999).

environment – I mean, “HELLO... knock, knock, anybody in there... HAVEN”T
YOU EVER HEARD OF GLOBAL WARMING?”...

Davis carries this in his pocket to remind him of his goals for this meeting and the passion of his colleagues. He must make the government listen to the voice of the forest. He must act as this voice, arguing for the interests and needs of this natural ecosystem and also for the cause of the Penan “the keepers of the forest.” This fight will act as an example to all other struggles of its kind. The Penan and the Bornean forest are now the icons for the environmental movement.

Government Officials

Along with various other government officials, The Minister of the Environment, Datuk Amar James, is at the meeting today to defend the government of these outrageous allegations of both cultural genocide and environmental massacre. They are also here to explain to the Eastern Penan their concept of development and to educate them on the ‘better’ life they could be living, as the Western Penan are. Most of all their hope is to defuse and gain control over the present situation because certain events of late have severely embarrassed the government and cast Malaysia in a very bad light to the international political community.

The fact of the matter is that timber is Borneo’s most valuable resource. Although they do not expect any type of increase in the logging yields at least until the end of this century, the logging industry still provides the backbone for Borneo’s developing economy. In addition, because trees are renewable resources, this is a revenue that, if monitored, can be stable and long-term. All in all, the Bornean forests are not only the most important asset to the nation, but also the most sustainable and logical resource. “A popular misconception is that we are going about logging with no plan for the future, when in reality our regulations on the logging industry are state of the art. Six million hectares of Borneo’s total forested land were designated as Permanent Forest Estate in 1994. In these areas, harvesting forest products is strictly regulated and indigenous communities, such as the Penan, are allowed to fish and hunt in the forests and to gather forest produce for their own use. Twelve percent, or 1.03 million hectares, of the forest were designated as Totally Protected Area. These are National Parks Nature Reserves and Wildlife Sanctuaries in which all visitors are prohibited from entering and damaging the natural ecosystem. We are serious about preserving the forest, but one must also remember the importance this industry represents for our economy.”⁷ Presently, there are some smaller industries on the rise in Borneo, but development is happening slowly and they find that even though they are attempting to reach self-sufficient capabilities, they are still importing a great deal of materials, resulting in a dependence on foreign nations. As with many other developing countries, there is a huge population problem in the urban-cores of the island’s states. Not only is there an influx of people coming from the rural areas, but there is a huge illegal population of immigrants from the Philippines and Thailand. There aren’t enough jobs for everyone, leaving many citizens in poverty. With a situation such as this one, it is not feasible for Borneo to even consider a cut back in timber production. “We depend on logging to bring us into the twenty-first century, and especially for this reason, we recognize and have implemented sustainable yield regulations for logging companies. We need these forests to last, they are what provide us with the means to develop” (Denslow & Padoch, 212-214).

Not only is the government supporting a sustainable form of economic development, they are also encouraging social development. “How are we to develop when parts of our population still run

“Forestry – Introduction,” “Economy – Natural Resources,” (14 May, 1999)

around with loin clothes on?” The Penan’s dress however, is not the only aspect of their society that the government has wished to improve. To officials, the Penan’s way of life seems dangerous, unhealthy, and inhumane. The Prime Minister once said, ”We are asking them to give up their unhealthy living conditions and backwardness for better amenities and a longer and healthier lifestyle.” Providing longhouses and a means of earning a living is a step in the right direction. In fact, compared to initiatives other countries have taken, this is one of the more beneficial plans. Clearly the welfare of the Penan is the government’s chief concern. “Of course the situation is not perfect. How can it be, we have just begun? However, the success of our plan is contingent on the co-operation of the indigenous people. We have potential. Why do they, specifically the Eastern Penan, insist on defying us and continue to live in a condition which is so much harder than the one we are offering? We have offered the Penan resettlement communities and urban areas in which they would enjoy running water, sanitation, health facilities, schools for their children, and a more stable form of income for parents. We simply want to offer these people the modern amenities they deserve, yet they continually refuse our help.” (Davis & Henley, 133).

Lastly, the government is concerned that they have received unwarranted criticism for the way in which they handled the Penan uprising. As a stipulation to the gathering of this group of people today, the government forbade any access by the media to the conference. The false reports and inflammatory language used by NGO’s, newspapers, and the radio, have painted Borneo and the whole of Malaysia as a military tyranny that punishes their people for no just cause. In actuality, the government had given warning to the Eastern Penan, made peaceful suggestions and sent in peace keeping troops from their military, and as a last resort (as the Penan weren’t offering any other alternative), they arrested the most verbal and rebellious members. In no way did they torture or kidnap these people. In fact, they even set bail which many tribe members were able to post, immediately setting them free. “We are in no way the monsters that many see us to be.”

The Meeting

These groups have all just assembled. Tu’eu, Dawat, Wade Davis, and Datuk James sit with other group members, their information at hand, their opening speeches prepared. They all have points to make and goals to accomplish. The room is hot and sticky. One can cut the tension with a machete. Some either ogle at the others, some attempt to cajole the other groups into seeing their point, while still others pretend oblivion and secretly observe the body language of those around them. Everyone knows that this meeting can easily end in a deadlock if they refuse to compromise – no one wants that. A decision, a compromise, must be reached. Each group needs to present their arguments. Misconceptions and stereotypes must be laid to rest and understanding needs to be nurtured. Every one of these groups lives on this island, and benefits from the forest. They all have different ways of life and each attaches value differently. Can these groups live in harmony? Can they simply live and let live? They must decide if logging should continue or be further restricted. Whether resettlement campaigns should be stopped or in some way amended. Most importantly, a decision should be made regarding how the government approaches the Penan. Should development include the mainstreaming of different cultures? Who decides? And finally, what should be done about logging in Borneo’s rain forest? Are there other alternatives which could be considered? All of these questions will be discussed at this meeting. Good Luck!