

Dayaks reclaiming their heritage from Borneo's devastated rainforests

Despite the devastation of Borneo's rainforests there are hopeful signs of a transition to a more sustainable use of resources. THOMAS REUTER and GREG ACCIAIOLI report.

Tourists from all over the world head to Borneo for orang-utans, unspoiled ancient rainforests and an insight into the traditional way of life of the Dayak people. This ecotourism is based on an idyllic facade. The reality of Kalimantan's forests is logging, mining and palm oil plantations as far as the eye can see.

When we visited the Indonesian province of East Kalimantan in Borneo, we saw widespread devastation of the region's tropical rainforest. Many Dayak—as the people indigenous to interior Borneo are collectively known—have lost their traditional land and culture as a result of logging, coal mining and massive expansion of commercial palm oil plantations.

But there are also hopeful signs of a transition to a more sustainable use of resources, with democratic reform in Indonesia, local political mobilisation, and genuine cooperation in conservation beginning to have an impact.

Under the authoritarian regime of former President Suharto the Indonesian state was highly centralised. Almost all of the revenue from resource-rich provinces such as East Kalimantan flowed to the national capital, Jakarta.

Forests were divvied up among Suharto's cronies in vast concessions. Little consideration was given to conservation and the fate of local people whose livelihoods depended on the forest.

By the late 1990s local people were fed up with the situation. East Kalimantan was one of the provinces that threatened to secede from Indonesia if it did not receive autonomy and a better share of locally generated revenue.



Dayaks are losing their traditional land and culture as a result of logging, coal mining and massive expansion of commercial palm oil plantations.

The regional autonomy laws of 1999 partially met these demands. There are still problems with the implementation of these laws, however. Local

leaders claim that less than 10 per cent of local revenue is returned to the government of Eastern Kalimantan even now.

Meanwhile, Dayak groups have been free to organise and become politically active. Several indigenous people have been elected to political offices, and Dayak organisations have proliferated. These have ranged from urban ethnic associations for Dayak urban migrants to armed Dayak militias. These militias intervene when conflicts arise with mining or palm oil corporations, or between indigenous and migrant communities.

Dayaks are ambivalent about development. They clearly want greater prosperity and better road access, education and health services, but they are also disappointed. Investment in their region often does not benefit them enough, and destroys their traditional livelihood of small-scale farming, rubber-tapping, fishing and hunting. Pollution from fertilisers and herbicides from palm

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oil plantations and tailings from mining operations pollute rivers and destroy fish stocks. Land alienation for logging and plantations has led to a scarcity of agricultural land. Some local people work on palm oil plantations, earning around five dollars for a hard day's labour. This causes dependence and poverty.



Dayak art shows their connectiveness with the environment. Thomas Reuther.

The price of basic supplies in these remote areas is very high due to the cost of transportation upriver. Some local officials make large profits by exploiting their

position to help foreign investors obtain permits and land certificates, often at the expense of fellow villagers.

Such devastated communities are subject to further disruptions because companies import large numbers of labour migrants from other islands where local religious and cultural practices are intimately linked to traditional agriculture. It may be difficult to adapt to a new way of life.

Some peoples have managed to revive their customs because they are fairly cohesive communities, but local culture and arts disappear more quickly in mixed communities of wage labourers. Local languages also are in decline under the influence of electronic media. Satellite dishes are a feature of most houses, even where there is widespread poverty.

There are also indications of successful resistance to such incursions in some areas of Kalimantan province. Malinau, a landlocked district in the northwest, was

declared a 'conservation district' by its district head in 2005.



In Samarinda, boom times aren't all good news. Thomas Reuther.

Some critics have dubbed this move merely a naming exercise. But the conservation-inclined district

government has registered only five coal-mining licences. Four oil palm concessions have been granted—but none of these currently operates.

In fact, the operations of one company were blocked in 2008 by a local community during the land-clearing phase. Community members argued that their 'customary forest', was being destroyed. When unheeded, they took the company's tractor into their own custody. Eleven community members were initially jailed, though the community has argued that everyone participated in the action. As a result, the company's legal action has been stymied to the present.

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In this instance, it was a community of Punan—formerly seen by the government as forest nomads unable to fend for themselves and thus subjected to resettlement—that acted to defend their own community interests.

In Malinau district, and throughout the province as a whole, various ethnic groups are organising and banding together to defend their interests. The ethnic groups inhabiting the Kayan Mentarang National Park—Kayan, Kenyah, Lun Dayeh, Sa'ban,

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<<From page 9 Tahol and Punan—have formed a Forum for Indigenous Peoples' Deliberations. They have successfully campaigned that the zonation of this national park must be based upon their own land-use patterns. The boundaries of their customary forest usage areas must be respected.

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), in its role as co-manager of the park, has facilitated such efforts. WWF is now seeking partnerships with indigenous groups across the border area of East and West Kalimantan and with East Malaysia to create a string of protected areas.

This 'Heart of Borneo' initiative will shield this vulnerable highland region from logging, oil palm concessions, and other environmentally destructive development. WWF has also been working with the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) to set up forest management units among the local populations.

GIZ has fostered pilot projects in Malinau, as well as in Berau and in Kapuas Hulu in West Kalimantan, to prepare local communities for international carbon trading under the REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) scheme.

Many Indonesians are looking to REDD+ as the key to realising sustainable development through forest conservation. In many cases their hopes are unrealistic, yet, in some parts of East Kalimantan, the groundwork for realising this potential through partnerships of international organisations, local NGOs and community organisations has already been laid. The efficacy of these partnerships in alleviating the environmental devastation of previous decades is beginning to be demonstrated.

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Assistant Professor Greg Acciaoli currently lectures in anthropology and sociology at the University of Western Australia. He has also taught at Vassar College, Columbia University and the University of Arizona, as well as guest lecturing at Universitas Indonesia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Darul Iman Malaysia, and Universiti Malaysia Kelantan.

Historian appointed editor-in-chief of ASR



Dr Michael Barr has been appointed editor-in-chief of the Asian Studies Association of Australia's (ASAA) flagship journal

Asian Studies Review for a three-year term.

Dr Barr is an Australian historian with expertise in the modern political histories of Singapore and Malaysia, and best known for his work on Lee Kuan Yew (*Lee Kuan Yew: the beliefs behind the man*). He has also written on the Asian values debate of the 1990s.

Dr Barr's work focuses on religion, ethnicity and nation building, particularly in Singapore and Southeast Asia, but he also teaches classes on international political economy. He has been teaching international relations and Asian Studies at Flinders University in 2007, having previously taught at the University of Queensland. Dr Barr is a general councillor of the ASAA.



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