

To my Sarawak friends and supporters

22 July 2015

This is a report on my recent visit to Sarawak, Malaysia, where I have been trying to help save the Baram River from being flooded by a totally unnecessary mega-dam. The huge Baram dam will result in a big loss of productive land, loss of cultural heritage, loss of biodiversity, loss of local capital investment, and removal of thousands of people whose riverside villages (longhouses) will be flooded. I have been helping my ex-pupil, Peter Kallang, leader of Save Sarawak Rivers, to fight the dam.

I am a returned volunteer from Sarawak; in 1966 I taught at Marudi Government Secondary School, on the Baram River inland from Miri, as part of VSA (Volunteer Service Abroad, New Zealand). In 1966 I travelled up the Baram, Tinjar, and Tutoh rivers with Peace Corps friends and school pupils. In 2013 I went back to a 50 year school reunion in Marudi and saw the results of dams and deforestation in Ulu Belaga.

On this recent trip I flew to Long Lellang to inspect micro-hydro opportunities and drove with Peter Kallang to the Baram dam site and the Save Rivers blockades. After a sealed road to Long Lama, there were endless dusty logging roads, with signs to drive on the left or the right as marked to avoid empty logging trucks going in, or full logging trucks coming out. The vegetation changed from oil palms to degraded forest to tall cut-over forest, as the landscape slowly became hilly then mountainous. All photos below were taken by me.

The Baram Dam

The Baram dam will flood 412 sq.km and displace over 10,000 people. It is not needed for electricity production because Sarawak already produces far more electricity than it can sell. Several huge dams are already completed as part of the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE) which plans eleven dams, including Baram, to flood a total of 2,320 sq.km, almost 2% of the land area of Sarawak (124,000 sq km).

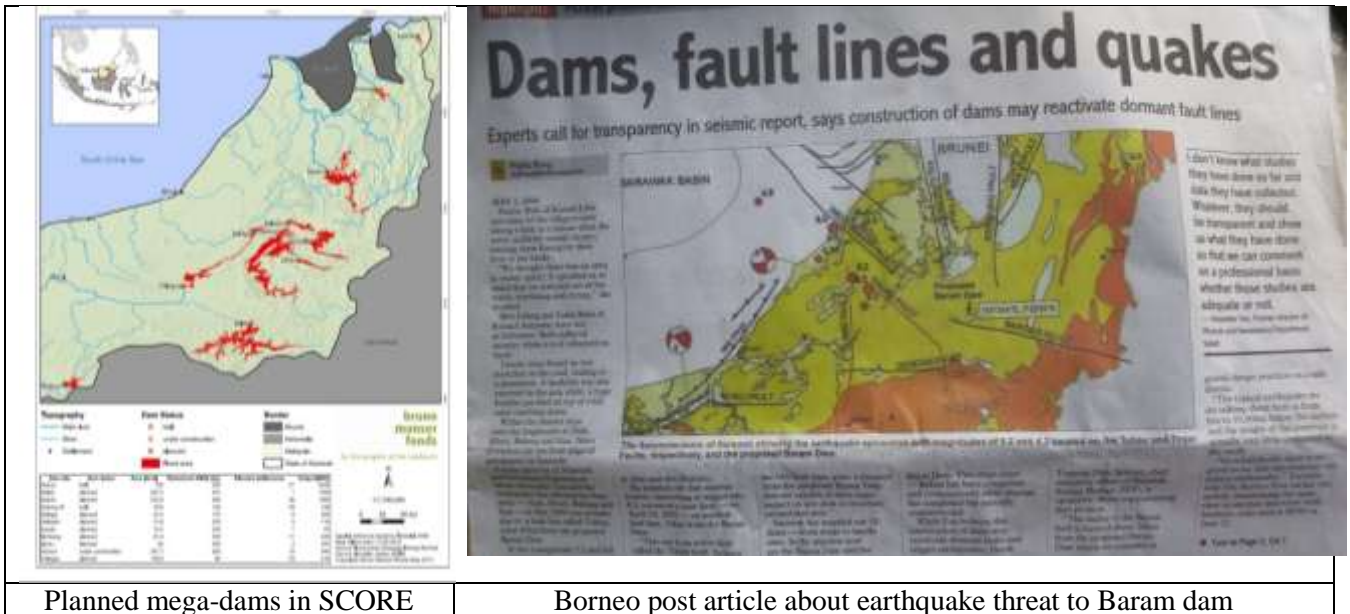
Stopping the dam is the first step towards ensuring regional development and the protection of natural and cultural heritage in local Baram communities. Regional development will require better road access, better energy supplies and new employment opportunities. At the same time, biodiversity and natural heritage can be preserved with sustainable forestry, and the establishment of new national parks or other protected land such as a Biosphere Reserve.



One of two blockade sites maintained by Save Sarawak Rivers

Report by Prof Andy Buchanan, University of Canterbury andy.buchanan@canterbury.ac.nz

The recent earthquake near Mt Kinabalu in Sabah has got many people scared about the possible effects of a major earthquake near the Baram dam, generating news and debate on the risk of a major earthquake, the threat of dam failure, and the seismic effects of flooding. The earthquake risk could provide a face-saving way out if the government decides not to proceed with the dam.



The fight to save the Baram River

The fight to stop the dam and save the Baram River is going on at many different levels. On the ground, Save Sarawak Rivers maintains two blockades, one near Long Lama where the planned main road to the dam site would start, and another on a dusty logging road near Long Na'ah where local construction access is likely to occur. These blockades cost a lot of money to maintain, usually with very small staff, but local supporters can turn out quickly in large numbers when they are urgently needed to block access to people or construction machinery.

At the political level, Save Sarawak Rivers is doing a huge amount of national and international lobbying, with the support of many NGOs including The Borneo Project (in California) and the Bruno Manser Fund (in Switzerland).

The Baram Dam is becoming a catalyst for political activism in Sarawak, and the fight for land rights of indigenous people. I attended a fund-raising dinner in Miri on 4th October. The dinner was booked out with supporters who heard fiery speeches opposing the dam and supporting much better land rights. Save Sarawak Rivers has very strong support from a wide range of groups representing most of the indigenous people of Sarawak.

For a comprehensive summary, see *No Consent to Proceed* http://www.forum-asia.org/uploads/publications/2014/August/No%20Consent%20to%20Proceed_Report-final.pdf

The anti-dam movement is very strong and growing, but it is struggling for money. Our help is needed to stop the dam and save the river. **Please think about how you can help.**

Energy

Other recent mega-dams include those at Batang Ai, Bakun and Murum. The Bakun dam alone can generate 2400 MW, only a quarter of which is being sold, and far more than Sarawak's domestic consumption of 1300 MW. The Bakun Dam was a Federal Government project, but rather than buying electricity from them, the state government is building its own dams, where the ruling family and their associates are taking a cut of everything. The Bakun lake displaced 10,000 people many of whom are now in squatters camps. The Baram dam is next in line.

Most local communities get no electricity from the mega-dams. There has been no socio-economic baseline study on the status of the affected population and their energy needs. The best options for energy production to encourage regional development in local communities are much smaller micro-hydro, biomass energy or direct solar energy. A 2013 report from the University of California has caught the attention of the new Chief Minister, leading to recent meetings and publicity. The report is "Kampung Capacity - Local Solutions for Sustainable Rural Energy in the Baram River Basin, Sarawak, Malaysia" by Rebekah Shirley and Daniel Kammen, of the Renewable and Appropriate Energy Laboratory

http://rael.berkeley.edu/old_drupal/sites/default/files/RAEL%20Report10.30.2013_0_0.pdf .



In most places, micro-hydro is clearly the best option, but the government is spending megabucks on mega-dams, now moving to phot-voltaic power with batteries and generators at many places. Micro-hydro is the obvious solution to most of Sarawak's energy needs, but local development needs champions with some expert advice.

Land rights

The four year fight over the Baram Dam is leading to a growing political movement for the land rights of native people in Sarawak, first in the Baram River area, but increasingly across the whole of Sarawak. Land law appears to be murky; I understand that "Native Customary Rights" (NCR) land can be designated if local people can produce some evidence that they were occupying and using the land in 1958. If so, they get some acknowledgement of customary rights, but still no legal title to the land. The acknowledgement may result in a cash payout from the logging companies who have purchased a logging licence from the government, or some compensation from the owners of oil palm plantations on the NCR land.

One strongly held view is that all the interior land belongs to the indigenous people; it was theirs before Sarawak was established, it was theirs before Sarawak joined Malaysia, and they have never sold it or given it away. These people consider NCR land to be all the forested land used in the past for hunting and gathering between one village and the next.

There are many local disputes over land, because land boundaries were never clear, and traditional family land rights become difficult to allocate as families grow in later generations. This may be similar to Maori land or customary land issues in the Pacific Islands. Help would be appreciated from legal people who are knowledgeable in Maori or aboriginal land law. Some of the NGOs have been assisting local people to map their traditional land and work on legal battles for land rights. Several court cases are in progress, but they are limited by available funding.

A further complication is that the once nomadic Penan people have lost their traditional forests, and they are settled in new villages, often alongside other native groups who have been settled for hundreds of years. These groups appear to get on well locally, with Penan making their own farms and providing paid labour to more established groups, but the land situation is very muddy because the Penan ranged over vast areas of forest with no discernible landmarks on 1958 aerial photographs. See the excellent new book – *The Peaceful People* by Paul Malone.

The government is attempting to carry out a “perimeter survey” at many villages. Some villagers support this because they think that it will define land areas which will meet their needs, but most are totally opposed to the perimeter survey because it may finally extinguish native customary rights to large areas of land outside the perimeter, allowing corrupt politicians to sell land which is not theirs to the highest bidder, and pocket the money. The sold land would then be available for any kind of development, none of which will be in the interests of the local native people.



Politics

These issues are intimately linked to politics and political corruption, at all levels, as described in the new book *Money Logging* by Lukas Straumann.

At the local level, the village headmen are appointed by the government on a salary, paid to support the dam to get village votes for the government. I met local leaders who had the courage to resist the dam, with the total support of their villagers, but they have lost their paid positions as a result of their opposition. If the village does not vote for the government, the headman loses his job and the village gets less government funding. I am told that this applies throughout the civil service, in government-

owned businesses, and even in private business. People who support the government get employment and business contracts. Those who do not will find things tough.

The governing party in Sarawak won the last national elections (2013), and that was achieved by buying votes in many different ways. Without the win in Sarawak, the governing federal party would have lost the election, so the federal government very strongly supports the local Sarawak government. There is widespread concern about gerrymandering. The city people (who generally oppose the government) are upset about having fewer and fewer electorates with large population, whereas the rural people, whose votes can be bought, have more and more electorates with fewer people in each.

It appears to me that a political solution to the dam and land rights is only possible if all the indigenous groups can get together into a strong co-ordinated lobby that can influence a change in legislation through powerful political representation in the State Parliament.

Logging

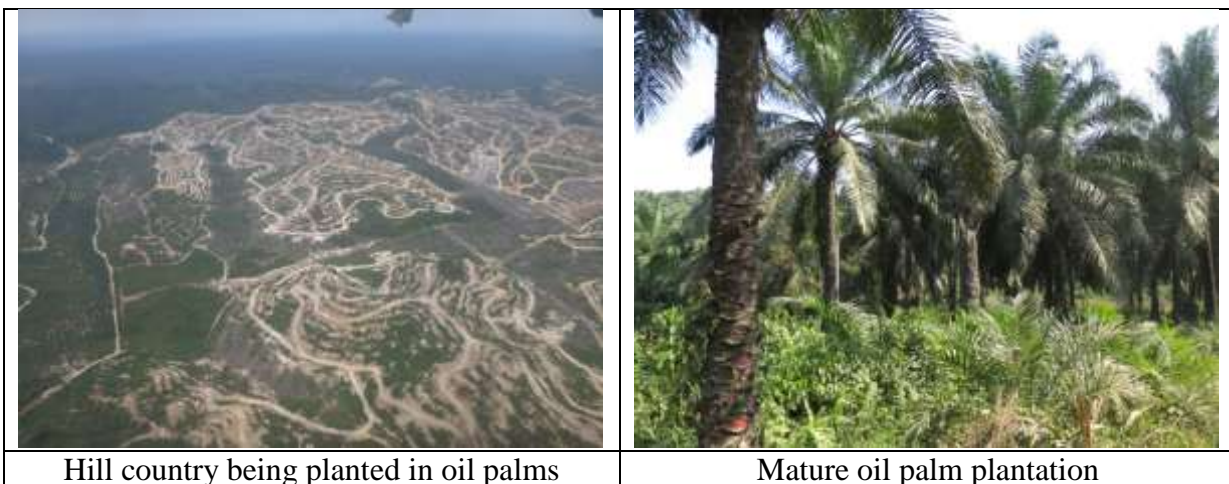
In 1966 the whole country was covered in rainforest and there was almost no logging, but in the last 20 years almost all of Sarawak has been logged, creating vast profits for the timber kings and the loss of land and livelihood for thousands of locals. The rivers are affected by silt. Most of Sarawak is covered in logging roads. See <http://www.protectedplanet.net> and <http://earthenginepartners.appspot.com/science-2013-global-forest> for the extent of damage.

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| <p>Aerial view of logging operations</p> | <p>Logging truck passing through a logged area</p> |
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| <p>One of many logging trucks on dusty roads</p> | <p>Log storage yard for sorting and labelling</p> |

The Sarawak government has sold logging licences for almost all of the state. Most of these licences have ended up in the hands of big logging companies who have removed millions of tons of logs, making huge profits. Logging was all supposed to be “selective logging” whereby only the largest trees were taken, allowing future extraction of large trees on a sustainable 25 year cycle, in perpetuity. In reality huge forest areas have been stripped and converted to oil palm, some other areas converted to plantation timber trees, and some forests have been partially logged, allowing for future logging in years ahead.

Oil Palm plantations

Vast areas of Sarawak have been planted with oil palm plantations following destruction of the forest. These are a mono-culture compared with the rich Borneo rainforest, but they provide some local jobs and income. The future of plantation forestry to provide jobs and local income with introduced or local tree species is still very uncertain.



Parks and Reserves

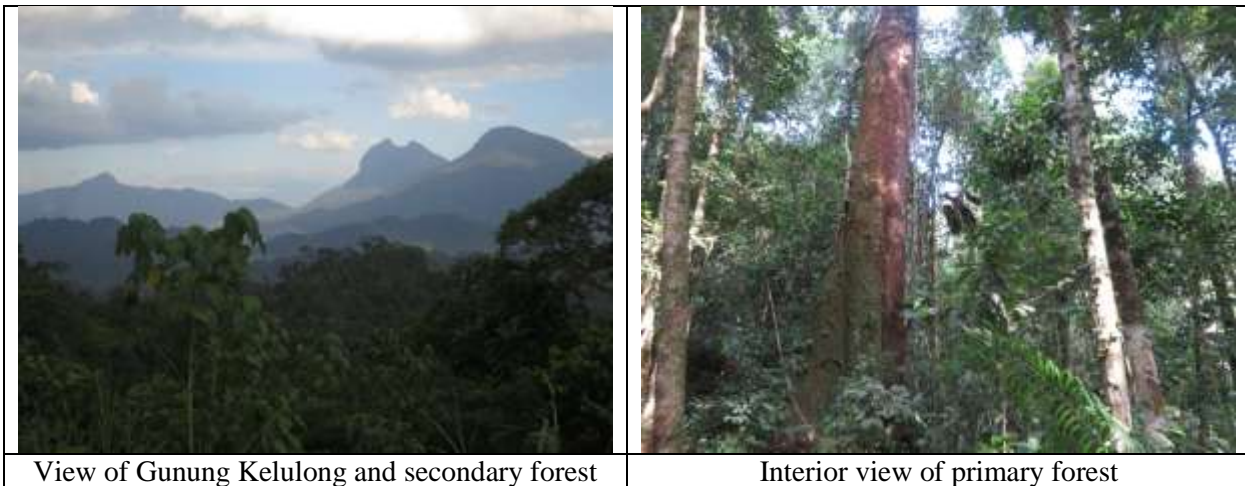
There are about 20 small National Parks in Sarawak, but most of the country is a maze of logging roads, with the last of the logs being dragged out on huge logging trucks. Glossy brochures about “protected wildlife” and “sustainable forestry” are a green-wash. The international “Heart of Borneo” alliance between Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia has been promoted by WWF, but the proposal is suffering from the continuing forest destruction in Sarawak. Among other NGO proposals for new parks, a Penan Peace Park is promoted by the Bruno Manser Fund.

The area of Sarawak’s National Parks is only 3.1% of the land area, very low compared to other small forestry countries (12% in New Zealand, 22% in Venezuela and 25% in Costa Rica). However, during a visit to the Sarawak Forestry Corp in Kuching, I was told that there are plans for major increases in the area of many national parks, some of which will include previously logged land.

One way for more local control over land use in the Baram region would be the establishment of a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, or better still, legislation so that control of NCR land and other logged land passes to local communities on the termination of existing logging licences or oil palm licences.

Local development

Local sustainable development is essential for maintenance and growth of village life in the Baram region. One result of logging is better road access. The next step will be to upgrade logging roads into permanent roads. Local development also requires job opportunities and cash crops, so that the roads are not simply a way out to the cities for disillusioned young people. Local jobs can be from eco-tourism or small scale horticulture including coffee, coco, rice, rubber, and fruit. On a larger scale there may be opportunities for more local engagement in the oil palm industry and sustainable forestry through joint ownership or partnering arrangements.



Cultural heritage

One of the potential big selling points for saving the Baram River and creating an eco-tourism business is the preservation of the rapidly disappearing cultural heritage, and the traditional lifestyle of remote villagers. The cultural heritage is diminishing rapidly, with movement to the cities and entertainment from television rather than traditional activities.



One of the strongest ways to retain cultural heritage is through eco-tourism, showing and teaching home-stay tourists many aspects of local culture, including the traditional lifestyle, food preparation, gardening, tool manufacturing, blow-pipes, basket-making, clothes, carving, dancing, art and music.

Eco-tourists will also want access to the forests to participate in walking, climbing, nature photography, botanising, and river sports like rafting and kayaking. Small business opportunities in eco-tourism or cultural-tourism will attract visitors, and encourage young village people to learn or re-learn traditional or new activities.

How can we help?

Technical support

Save Sarawak Rivers needs support in many areas. Mostly they need is money to continue the fight, but they also need some technical, legal or engineering support, including:

- Legal support on land issues, especially with reference to Maori land in New Zealand
- Environmental impact. Help with assessing Social and Environmental Impact Statements
- Publicity and education. Teachers can use the Baram case study in schools or universities.
- Seismic risk of earthquakes due to local seismicity or dam flooding.
- Biodiversity. Assistance with the impacts of loss of biodiversity due to flooding.
- Website support. The Save Sarawak Rivers website has crashed, and urgently needs re-writing and hosting. There is good material on Facebook and the blog site, but there is no current website.

Financial support

Save Sarawak Rivers urgently needs money to support their blockades and for on-going legal battles. There are many of us living outside Malaysia who are keen to help. I have donated some money. I encourage you to do the same. The two options are direct to the Save Sarawak Rivers bank account or via The Borneo Project website:

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| Name: SAVE RIVERS Sdn. Bhd. Bank: Malayan Banking Berhad (Maybank) Account Number: 561181102247 SWIFT: MBBEMYKL Branch code: 61181 | The Borneo Project website: http://borneoproject.org You will get a receipt and they will pass the donation on to Save Sarawak Rivers at your request. |
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Recent books:

- *Money Logging: On the Trail of the Asian Timber Mafia* by Lukas Straumann. Published by Bruno Manser Fonds, 2014. Paper copy or e-book.
- *The Peaceful People: The Penan and Their Fight for the Forest* by Paul Malone, 2014. Paper or e-book.
- *Damned Dams & Noxious Nukes – Questioning Malaysia’s Energy Policy* by Kua Kia Soong. Published by SUARAM 2013 www.suaram.net.

Websites:

The Borneo Project <http://borneoproject.org>

Based in California.

Native rights, dams, forestry, videos about the Baram dam. Donations and email updates.

Bruno Manser Fund <http://www.bmf.ch/en/>

Based in Switzerland.

Lots of info on forestry and dam issues in Sarawak. Well referenced reports.

Save Sarawak Rivers. The website has died but see <http://saveriversnet.blogspot.co.nz/> and

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SaveSarawakRivers?fref=photo>

Sarawak Report www.sarawakreport.com UK based. Up-to-date details on a huge range of election and corruption issues including bribery and dams.

International Rivers www.internationalrivers.org

Based in California.

Campaigns on threatened rivers all around the world, including Sarawak.

BBC: Forest change: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-24934790> which leads to:

<http://earthenginepartners.appspot.com/science-2013-global-forest>. Zoom in to Sarawak.

Protected Planet: An excellent Google-Earth overlay of the Sarawak National Parks is available on <http://www.protectedplanet.net> which shows that Usun Apau and Pulong Tau National Parks are already being logged in some places. For example look at the “Satellite” view of

http://www.protectedplanet.net/sites/Usun_Apau_National_Park

Heart of Borneo: This project has a lot of potential, but there is very little protection for the threatened areas.

http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/borneo_forests/

Wikipedia: Many pages are relevant, including -

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarawak_Corridor_of_Renewable_Energy.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baram_Dam