

Help Community Researchers Protect Sabah's Biocultural Heritage

A fundraising drive by indigenous community researchers in Sabah

The Malaysian state of Sabah (on the island of Borneo) hosts some of the last remaining Southeast Asian tropical rainforest. Home also to many indigenous peoples, it lies at the heart of global efforts to conserve the vitality of our planet's biological and cultural diversity. Young, dynamic, and keen to explore how globalisation can be harnessed to help maintain local biocultural diversity, community researchers are at the crest of a wave of new ideas about conservation in Sabah. Their story is about putting people at the heart of biodiversity conservation and protected area management. As Sabah's development pulse races to meet the volatile challenges of competing global priorities, community researchers are asking us to pause and reflect: in what ways can conservation and development benefit the dynamic maintenance of our cultural heritage, particularly a living heritage as vivid and resilient as that of Sabah's indigenous peoples?

This journey started in 2005 when a group of mostly young school-leavers from a rural village in Sabah came together to investigate how traditional uses of plants, animals and landscapes can be compatible with conservation priorities of parks and other types of protected areas.

With the support from a consortium of partners¹, this small group of community researchers expanded to include neighbouring villages next to the Crocker Range Park, and later on, to other villages at the foothills of Mt. Kinabalu. Together, they have

gone on to map key resource areas and mark them on 3D models, conduct livelihoods assessments, record oral histories, collect botanical specimens of useful plants, and produce a series of community-made films that share the concerns of their community with the outside world. They have worked with more than 500 community members from villages located next to the Crocker Range Park and Kinabalu Park, conducting fieldwork, ethnobiological expeditions and workshops to document the cultural values of landscapes.



Batu Gayatas, one of the stone menhirs documented during a 2010 expedition to Ulu Papar conducted jointly by community researchers and partner organisations. Since then, community researchers have recorded more than 450 GPS fixes of important resource harvesting locations and cultural sites throughout Ulu Papar. Their work has spurred the Sabah Museum to announce a cultural heritage expedition to Ulu Papar planned for 2013. Photo by Jenny Sanem.

¹ The consortium of partners began with Sabah Parks, the Global Diversity Foundation and the Ulu Papar community, and over the years, has included Sabah Biodiversity Centre, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, University of Kent UK, Pacos Trust and Universiti Malaysia Sabah.



Community researchers are trained in multidisciplinary participatory action research methods. They work with their communities to document resource use patterns and traditional ecological knowledge, and share their findings through community roadshows, videos and dialogues with outside agencies. Their work contributes towards a larger mission of trying to find new ways of working together with protected area managers and conservation authorities.

Their research findings suggest a deep cultural connection between indigenous people and their lands, dating back for generations. It portrays a way of living, speaking and thinking - in other words, a culture - that is interconnected with how they access and use the natural resources and landscapes around them. Packaged into publications, posters, roadshows and photo essays, their data informs the larger planning process so that conservation policies and practices recognise the importance of indigenous worldviews and incorporate subsistence livelihood needs for the long-term. Using interactive maps, community-made videos and slide presentations, they are taking this message to heads of government departments and their personnel, civil society groups, politicians and the media. It has awakened a new, and increasingly appealing, brand of partnership where communities are able to influence the design, implementation and impact of conservation interventions.

Today, there are teams of community researchers based in Ulu Papar area of the District of Penampang, and in the village of Bundu Tuhan in the District of Ranau. The highly participatory process undertaken to mobilise community-based research and action has helped their home communities articulate a common vision and aspirations for well-being. For them, it is a journey that has fostered a sense of solidarity amongst the people they work with, giving them a belief in the future.

These, however, remain early steps in the larger journey of equipping state governments to recognise and support community conservation initiatives and larger endogenous development goals. It is critical for the work of community researchers to continue and for their repertoire of knowledge, skills and savvy to grow. Their impressive capacities - built with the input from everyone in their communities - and their own immense efforts to learn, overcome and persevere represent an excellent start. Now they must rise to face the next, more intimidating challenge of defending their communities against the construction of dams and other large-scale infrastructure projects, asserting their communities' priorities in negotiations with protected area managers so that livelihood needs are fulfilled and cultural values upheld, and calling for cross-sectoral due diligence, transparency and accountability as part of the long-term commitment to safeguarding Sabah's living biocultural heritage.



Over the last 8 years, more than 30 people have worked as a community researcher.

The Ulu Papar and Bundu Tuhan community researchers are calling for your support! They are looking for funds to support their stipends and local travel expenses in Sabah, subsistence costs incurred while they are in Kota Kinabalu for meetings and dialogues, offset expenses for office supplies and telecommunications, and costs for field research and community workshops. More importantly, your kind contribution will enable them to continue with their work as an independent non-profit community-based research group.

Some of the community-based initiatives they would like to conduct include:

- Documentation of stone monoliths and cultural heritage sites in Ulu Papar
- Documentation of Dusun cosmology of Mt Kinabalu in Bundu Tuhan
- Establishing the Community Conservation Area network for the proposed Kinabalu EcoLinc connecting Kinabalu and Crocker Range Parks
- Development of a community-based zoning plan to support sustainable livelihoods and watercatchment conservation in Ulu Papar
- Participatory approaches to establishing the Ulu Papar Community Use Zone in the Crocker Range Park and the Crocker Range Biosphere Reserve
- Establishment of a Community Biocultural Heritage Centre in Buayan, Ulu Papar
- Cultural tourism to enhance conservation of community forests in Bundu Tuhan
- Establishing participatory resource monitoring in Bundu Tuhan
- Revitalising cultural knowledge and storytelling in mother tongue dialect in Bundu Tuhan



Ulu Papar Community Researcher Peter Sabandok pulls the bamboo raft across the Papar River accompanied by Bundu Tuhan Community Researcher Remmy Alfie Awang. They are transporting two Sabah Parks staff members to attend the Ulu Papar Congress, organised by community researchers to discuss contemporary environmental issues faced by Sabah communities. Photo by Rabani Ayub.

More information highlighting the journey of the Ulu Papar and Bundu Tuhan Community Researchers can be found online:

- GDF website News & Updates page: http://www.globaldiversity.org.uk/news_updates/1
- GDF Facebook albums:
 - Ulu Papar Congress 2012
<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150728123692819.411146.111160397818&type=3>;
 - Telling the Ulu Papar Story
<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150975311987819.430476.111160397818&type=3>;
 - Building the Buayan-Kionop Participatory 3-D Model
<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150609083107819.395154.111160397818&type=3>;
 - Ulu Papar Community Roadshow
<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10150289624142819.344636.111160397818&type=3>

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