

RESEARCH NOTE

POTENTIAL THREATS OF POACHING OF LARGE MAMMALS IN
BELUM AND TAMAN NEGARA

Two of the largest remaining unlogged forests in Peninsular Malaysia are the greater Belum area in northern Perak, and Taman Negara and adjoining forests in Kelantan, Terengganu and Pahang. These areas are known to be rich in wildlife and are of inestimable conservation value (Stevens 1968, Davison 1995).

Taman Negara has been enacted as a National Park since 1938/9 (DWNP 1987) and it contains the largest continuous area of unlogged forest in the Peninsula (434,300 ha). In recognition of the importance of this area, 15.7% of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) workforce, i.e. 112 people, work in the Park (DWNP/DANCED1996). The Belum area (Belum and Temenggor valleys 347,110 ha), on the other hand, is unprotected even though it was proposed as a protected area under the Third Malaysia Plan (EPU 1976) and its continuous stretch of forest joining with the Halabala forest in Southern Thailand (110,000 ha), which has recently been gazetted as a protected area by the Thai Government (MOSTE-Malaysia & MOSTE-Thailand, 1998). The conservation of Malaysian wildlife resources is the legitimate concern of the Malaysian Government and the primary responsibility for this matter rests with the DWNP (DWNP 1992). DWNP has therefore, taken this task seriously and has made a number of proposals to the Perak State Government to get the Belum area protected as a wildlife reserve, national park or state park (Steven 1968, DWNP 1994). The struggle to protect Belum and to transform it into a transboundary protected area continues today (Elagupillay & Burhanuddin 1997) in spite of the acute shortage of DWNP manpower in the district, Ulu Perak. There are only 12 men to monitor and manage wildlife in an area greater than 485,644 ha of forest, which includes Belum and Temenggor.

Large mammals require sufficient suitable habitat to prevent extinction. They also require active protection from poachers. The greater Belum area and the Taman Negara area are two of the last remaining forest areas in Peninsular Malaysia with exceptional habitat quality, where the full compliment of the high forest mammals can be found, excluding the Javan rhinoceros and possibly the banteng. The mere presence of suitable habitat alone was not enough to protect these two species from persistent over-exploitation followed by extinction in Peninsular Malaysia. Both Belum and Taman Negara continue to be targeted by poachers and the species most at risk today from over-exploitation are the Sumatran rhinoceros and the elephant. Sumatran rhinoceros horn can fetch US\$8,000 per 100 grammes and elephant ivory, US\$480 per kilogramme, on the international black market in wildlife product (Lynam 1999). The poachers can also act as gaharu collectors or

viceversa. Gaharu is the much sought after scented wood found in some *Aquilaria malaccensis* trees. In 1992, the DWNP arrested 10 Thais in Taman Negara ostensibly seeking gaharu, but also bearing wire-snares. There are three grades of gaharu and the best grade is worth about US\$750 per kilogramme (Taman Negara rangers, personal communication).

There are estimated to be between 32 and 36 Sumatran rhinoceros left in the whole of Peninsular Malaysia (Abdul Kadir Hashim, personal communication). Organised poachers are apparently well aware of the locations of the last remaining populations of rhinoceros and also of the fact that the Belum and the Taman Negara areas are used as elephant relocation areas by the DWNP. The elephants are translocated to Belum and Taman Negara from decimated forests to the south (Khan 1991). In the last 24 years 422 elephants have been translocated, of which 212 have been released in Belum (Jasmi and Salman, 1998). Recent tiger surveys in both the greater Belum area and also in Taman Negara and adjoining unlogged forest came across ample fresh evidence of professional poachers at work.

Once inside the forest, organised teams of poachers make particular use of distinctive, relatively narrow, reasonably accessible ridge tops which run through the forest for several kilometres. For example, the catchment ridges of Sungai Singgor in the greater Belum area or of Ulu Sat in Taman Negara or of Sungai Perlis in Jengai Forest Reserve. Along these jungle highways, large trees are used as signboards, in that messages and codes are engraved in the bark for fellow poachers to note. Messages not written in code may draw attention to a variety of topics, such as the date or the richness of the area or health problems or the route taken, etc. Individuals are identified by code. The messages may be written in Thai or Malay, worryingly indicating that foreigners are also stealing Malaysia's wildlife and other forest resources. Camps can be found along these jungle highways with no attempt made to conceal or dispose of food packaging originating from both Thailand and Malaysia. More serious though is the evidence of the poachers handwork, such as that found in Sira Dinding in the greater Belum area. The remains of an elephant shot at a salt-lick approximately three months prior to discovery by DWNP and WCS in 1997 during a tiger survey. There were bullet holes in the skull and the tusks had been removed.

In Taman Negara there are ranger posts which have been set up to combat poaching and other illegal activities such as illegal logging. In 1991, a bulldozer and other logging equipment was seized by DWNP staff at Aring near Kuala Koh (Azhar Ahmad, personal communication). Taman Negara rangers, however, are at a disadvantage and are understandably fearful because they are unarmed (so there is no temptation to hunt) whereas professional poachers carry powerful firearms. For example, there is a ranger post in the Ulu Sat area which is constantly manned by three men, but the rangers do not go on walking patrols in the forest instead they patrol Sungai Sat from a boat, while professional poachers make use of the

ridge overlooking Sungai Sat (Taman Negara rangers, personal communication).

Tigers are also at risk from poaching activities but they are a less lucrative commodity for professional poachers in that the sale of a whole carcass which may weigh up to 100 kilogrammes fetches a mere US\$1,200 (Lynam 1999). Nevertheless, a raid by DWNP on a restaurant in Raub in Pahang in 1998 which was selling tiger cuisine (China Press 1998), theft of body parts from a tiger which had been run over by a bus (The Star 1998) and evidence of tiger bones (supposedly tiger derivatives) being sold in a number of traditional medicine outlets in Kuala Lumpur gathered by the Global Survival Network (GSN) in 1997 (GSN, departmental communication), indicates that there can be no room for complacency where tigers are concerned.

Is it possible to tackle this large mammal poaching problem in the forest before it is too late. Thirty-five percent of the land area of Peninsular Malaysia is covered by forest (4.73 million ha) and DWNP's workforce is only 714 (600 excluding administrative and financial staffs) of which 23.5% are tied up in essential law enforcement work outside the Protected Area system (DWNP/DANCED 1996). DWNP is responsible for the conservation of wildlife (DWNP 1992), but has insufficient manpower to enforce the law and manage wildlife throughout Protected Areas, Forest Reserves and other habitats. This weakness has been identified as a major concern in conserving Peninsular Malaysia's wildlife resources (Stevens 1968, DWNP/DANCED 1996). In order to eliminate this potential threat in Malaysia and in Thailand to participate in talks about the problem which is identified in this paper, and to co-operate in action. DWNP also needs to be strengthened in terms of manpower and training capacity especially in protected areas and at rich wildlife habitats such as Belum. This will enable the DWNP not only to enforce the law effectively but also to embark on an extensive conservation awareness programmes among local communities and among other agencies.

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