

## Eduard Wenk's jungle adventures in Sabah (1936-1939)

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### INTRODUCTION

On New Year's Day 1936, Eduard Wenk, a 29-year old young Swiss geologist entered employment with the Shell Group. Wenk had strong credentials: as a post-graduate he spent two years at the University of Uppsala (Sweden) and participated in a Greenland excursion. Wenk underwent a three-month training with the Shell Group in The Hague (Netherlands), before being sent as a regional geologist "*in poorly known British North Borneo*" (Wenk, 1994). During the years 1936-1939, Wenk carried out harsh jungle fieldwork in Sabah, before returning to Europe as World War II was just starting.

Wenk had established his headquarters on the island of Tambisan and from there he frequently went to Sandakan for shopping. There, he became acquainted with Henry ("Harry") Keith, a forestry supervisor for the British Government and with his wife Agnes Newton Keith. Agnes was later to write about her time in Sabah in her price-winning book "Land below the Wind" featuring Wenk as one of the characters and describing jungle trips undertaken together.

Among his many journeys, Wenk travelled through the Dent Peninsula and surveyed the Kinabatangan River, getting as far up as Inarad, on the edge of the Maliau Basin (Figure 1).

In travelling through the jungle, a foreign and mysterious environment for an European, Wenk's safety and the successful pursuit of his scientific objectives depended on the native people engaged to accompany him. Wenk says that parting from his loyal team of local staff was hard; "*I really enjoyed the three strenuous years in "Utan" and learned a lot for life: dealing with strangers, scheduling work in difficult terrain and handling administrative duties*".

The geological observations made in Sabah by Wenk and those made earlier by Prof. Max Reinhard were eventually published as Bulletin 1 of the newly established Geological Survey Department of the British Territories in Borneo (Reinhard & Wenk, 1951; Wannier, 2017). Wenk later became ordinary Professor for Mineralogy and Petrography at the University of Basel. He made fundamental contributions to the history of the structure and metamorphism of the Central Alps that have earned him a place amongst the great Alpine geologists.

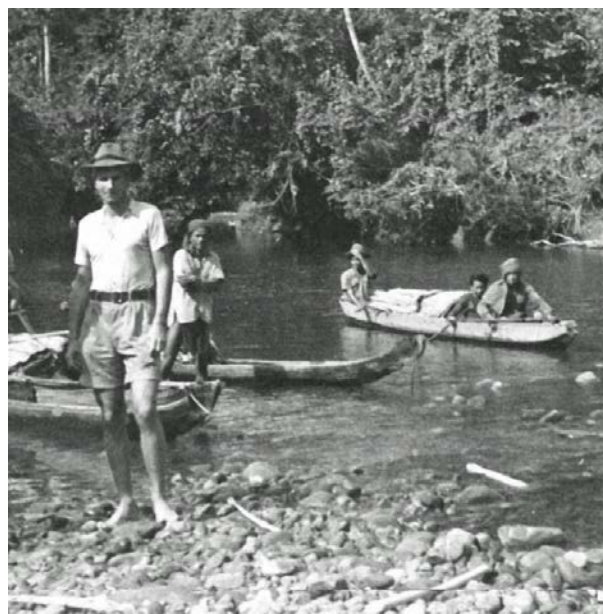


Figure 1: Eduard Wenk on Sungai Inarad.

A selection of Wenk's adventurous memories in Sabah is captured here, based on his own descriptions (Wenk, 1938 & 1993).

### NEWS FROM LONDON IN THE LONGHOUSE

In the summer of 1936, newly arrived in Sandakan, Wenk started his geological exploratory work by sailing up the Kinabatangan River accompanied by a team of nine local people, Dusun and Dayak. The journey started by vapor ship, followed by motorboat and in the upper reaches finally by dugout boats. As a geologist, Wenk had to follow up all the major tributaries, first in a dugout boat ("*gobang*"), before progressing on foot with the help of a *parang*. As soon as the party reached the edge of the primary forest, the *gobang* was left behind, and everybody continued on foot. After one week of slow progress through the jungle, Wenk and his men passed the watershed with the Sepulut River; walking down they arrived at a Dayak longhouse where a party was set-up in their honour, Wenk being the first white "*Tuan*" to reach that place. There, in the midst of the Sabah Mountains, Wenk was informed of the latest international news having

reached this longhouse (free translation):

*“Here, far away from telephone and electricity, I learned in December 1936, under the equator, via gong signals relayed from one village to the next, a message which at first I found difficult to understand: the principal chief of the British had left his office and had run away because of a women...”*

It was weeks later, having reached the coast that he learned of King Edward VIII<sup>th</sup> abdication!

Back from this trip, Wenk spent three months in Miri, to write his report and to get cured from malaria. His next assignment (1937) was to carry out geological mapping of the Dent Peninsula.

### THE DANGERS OF PHOTOGRAPHING WILD ELEPHANTS

While visiting a mud volcano, a clearing in the midst of dense jungle, Wenk and his men met with a five-member elephant herd that he wanted to photograph. There was a long discussion and preparation: the crew retreated to a safe place. Buyung, his trusted Dayak carrying the Winchester rifle and Wenk, camera in hand, crept forward and found a hiding place between the boards of giant trees. Moving two steps forward Wenk activated his camera (Figure 2, a poor shot given the circumstances); the noise alerted the elephants and they came forward. Afraid, Buyung shot the foremost elephant through the eye to the brain; the



**Figure 2:** The unfortunate pygmy elephant, moments before the shooting (picture by E. Wenk).

elephant fell, Wenk retreated quickly to his hiding place and the herd ran past them.

As all stories go (see above!) this one became public as well: when Wenk’s party later came to a village, people were commenting of this “heroic” deed! Like a wildfire, the news spread immediately to Sandakan, and came to the attention of the Forestry and Hunting-Minister. By law, Buyung would have gone to prison for six months. As the rightful owner of the rifle, Wenk took the full responsibility for the shot; the cost for killing the poor elephant was \$ 100. After that sad even, Wenk never again photographed elephants in the jungle.

### WILD ENCOUNTERS ON THE RIVER

In November 1937, Wenk and his crew were making their way up the Kuala Tabin by outboard motor boat and *gobang*. Having left the swamps and reached gently undulating country, the river became plugged with floating logs.

In his 1938 article for the British North Borneo Herald, Wenk recalls the journey: *“The motor, towing two gobangs, had often to be stopped and all three boats had to be unloaded and pulled across half submerged logs; or the boats had to be overloaded and pushed below them. (...) A clever paddler in the bow and an experienced helmsman can evade most of the obstacles, which are almost invisible in the muddy water. Though we had the assistance of both of these specialists, our propeller six times hit sunken logs and once the tail of a crocodile. The latter beast jumped wildly and frightened the men in the towed gobangs!”*

*“Even more excitement was caused by a biawak (monitor lizard) that had been watching fishes from the branch of an overhanging tree and suddenly dropped into the motor prahu. The catching of this snappish varano was no easy task. The only way to deal with him was to cover his head with a tent sheet and tie up the snout. (...) The biawak escaped one week later...”*

### GIANT PYTHONS

On a Sunday afternoon, Wenk’s party was leisurely moving up a right-hand branch of Sungai Tabin and noticed a far-away sound. Wenk (1938) writes:

*“As we approached the sound grew louder and louder. One more tanjong and we came face to face with a mighty cataract, a seventy foot high and fifty foot broad solid rock wall, over which the still powerful river leaps in many cascades-rushing down, dashing itself to spray against the naked rocks, until it reached a great circular basin at the foot of the falls.*

*It appeared possible to encircle the lake on the left and then to climb the waterfall. Accordingly my men began to cut a path along the left shore. In the meantime, I climbed a rock on the right, took pictures and hammered at rock samples, as a geologist is supposed to do. Suddenly I heard a piercing cry, followed by a confused chorus: ular, ular sawa! Dia gigit sama Moulud! Luka besar! Suda*

*lari dalam ayer! Bukan main besar dia! – and then: di sana kapala, potong, potong lekas! Lagi! Lagi! ad inf.*

*I was too far away to witness the incident. But when I reached the spot, I elicited the following remarkable facts: a giant python had suddenly emerged from the depth of the lake and rushed towards mandore Moulud, the man in the lead. Moulud, standing three feet above water level, saw his danger and tried to climb the bank, but was bitten on the leg. The cries of the mandore and the shouts of his companions so frightened the snake that he released his grip immediately. But in spite of this the mandore was badly hurt, his ankle bone having been laid bare. The python escaped into the water, was struck by a stone, swam with the current and stopped in a quiet pool, about ten yards broad. This pool was instantly surrounded and all its strategic points occupied by seven men, armed with parangs, stones and sticks.*

*Such was the dramatic situation when I arrived on the scene that I also participated with rock samples and hammer as weapons. I had a Winchester with me, but had only two rounds left and these had to be spared for game and for elephants, which seemed to inspect our camp at 2 a.m. as we had learned the previous night again. What now followed was a wild and thrilling hunt. The snake was invisible at first; but with the help of long poles, the coolies succeeded in prodding it and the snake would now and again thrust up its nasty looking head. The rock sample and some common or garden rock boulders were put to an unexpected use, while sticks and poles thrashed and plashed in the water. The snake endeavored to escape upstream, but then a man, an approved snake specialist indeed, sprang from his perch on a rock boulder into the water and slashed at the head with his parang just at the right moment, whilst another man struck at the middle portion of the body. The snake dived, but a stream of blood betrayed its position. Then a man succeeded in securing the end of the tail, and amidst wild shouting everybody helped, either to pull the reptile on to the gravel bank, or to deal it further blows. And then as the climax, the mandore received the privilege of crushing the monster's head with my honorable two-pound rock hammer, which earlier had crushed so many igneous rocks in Switzerland, Sweden, Greenland and even granodiorite on Mount Kinabalu.*

*With the help of the centimeter scale on the edge of my compass and a rotan, we measured the python and obtained a length of 7.20 meters, i.e. roughly 22 feet. Unfortunately the skin had been badly damaged by the many parang cuts. The coolies, however, managed to recover the bladder, which they later sold to some Chinese for a few dollars.*

*That is another moment which I shall never forget, and which I photographed in all its details (Figure 3): the search for the snake's bladder. Imagine seven men opening and vivisecting the still convulsive body and carefully sorting out the intestines. The question of the sex of the snake, of great moment to the natives on all*



**Figure 3:** Freshly caught giant python, Sungai Tabin (picture by E. Wenk).

*such occasions, gave rise to heated discussions, as the body had been severely damaged during the struggle. At last, recalling dim memories of early zoological studies, I had to state authoritatively that it was a male, basta!"*

*"That was the third giant python I met in B.N.B. In September 1936, I shot one that measured 17 feet. This was in upper S. Bangan (Kinabatangan), on the sandy shores of the basin below the highest of the many waterfalls there. According to my men these giant pythons are typical up-country snakes and frequent the pools or basins below rapids and waterfalls. This one had a wild pig inside it and could only move very sluggishly (Figure 4). Pythons must be exceedingly tenacious of life, as this one, 24 hours after I had smashed its head with a No. 4 cartridge at point blank range, was still alive."*

*"The second one, which also had a newly devoured pig inside it was killed in September 1937 by my coolies in a rentis that runs through the swampy country between Topogi and Maruap. The coolies obtained an excellent meat supper to go with their rice (I mean python not pork!). Unfortunately, when I arrived there some days later the stench was such that I had to refrain from measuring the snake."*



**Figure 4:** Defenseless giant python digesting a wild boar (picture by E. Wenk).

### POST-SCRIPTUM

Eduard Wenk (1907-2001) was one of my professors at Basle University; he was a reserved, most kind person, generally with a Toscani cigar in his mouth. Never in my case, after many excursions in the Alps, when we had ample opportunities to communicate personally with our professors, did the subject of Borneo come up for discussion. I would never have suspected at the time that his was the profile of a true pioneer explorer. How misleading clichés can be!

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