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# THE NATIONAL PARKS OF MALAYSIA

**by Himraj Dang**

*Southeast Asia is one of the richest rainforests belts in the world. However, given current rates of deforestation, it is estimated that by the year 2010 most will have disappeared or have been severely damaged. Just as the rates of destruction are increasing throughout the region, evidence is pouring in that these forests are an invaluable resource, both for the region and the world. At a global level, deforestation is responsible for loss in genetic diversity and what has come to be known as the greenhouse effect. At a local level, deforestation has resulted in soil erosion, floods, and the silting of rivers, besides the disruption of the lifestyles of forest-dwelling people.* ***Dang's*** *report on Malaysia's protected areas throws light on a region which shares several characteristics with the Indian sub-continent, and several problems.*

I spent three months in Malaysia last summer and visited some of the country's well managed National Parks (NPs) and was able to observe first hand the contrast between these areas and the lands surrounding them. Malaysia, with a land area of 32,855,000 ha., possesses 20,996,000 ha. of closed forest, i.e. 64 per cent. The flora of the peninsula comprises 7,900 species of flowering plants including at least 2,000 species of trees. The fauna is equally diverse with 199 species of land mammals and 460 breeding birds. The majority of these animals are forest-dwelling.

The best known National Park of Malaysia is Taman Negara, which literally translated means 'National Park'! It has been maintained since the '30s as a pristine forest area comprising 4,613 sq km. on the border of the Pahang, Kelantan and Trengganu states in the north east part of the peninsula. This park contains a vast area of lowland and hill rain forests which graduate into the montane forests of Gunung Tahan, which at 2,174 metres is the highest mountain on the peninsula. Taman Negara is approached by a river journey on the Sungai Tembeling. At Kuala Tembeling in Pahang, which is accessible by road from Kuala Lumpur and by rail from Singapore, there is a jetty which houses the many *prahus* which run the daily boat ferry to the Park headquarters at Kuala Tahan. The journey by river is redolent of the sights and sounds of old Malaysia, of the days when rivers were the only avenues of transport. The only difference is that today everyone (save for the odd Orang Asli aborigine who still uses a dugout) travels by outboard.

***" The journey by river is redolent of the sights and sounds of old Malaysia, of the days when rivers were the only avenues of transport."***

The Taman Negara boundary begins some 35 km. upriver on the Tembeling. The sides of the river are crowned with tall kerayong *(Parkia javanica)*, neram *(Dipterocarpus oblongifolia)*, jambu air *(Eugenia sp.)*, the purple-flowering bungor *(Lagerstroemia specisa)* and the fruit-bearing ara *(Ficus glomerata)* trees. On the way one may also chance across long-tailed macaques in the trees, hornbills flying overhead, monitor lizards swimming alongside the *prahu* and smooth otters sunning themselves on sandbanks.

Kuala Tahan is a small settlement where visitors can stay. It also has administrative offices and a centre for interpretation. From Kuala Tahan one either walks or travels by river to any one of six hides (five with overnight accommodation) built around salt-licks spread in the southern area of the park (the northern end from Kelantan is presently inaccessible, though there are plans to open it). From these hides one can see seladang *(Bos gaurus)*, tapir, wild boar, sambar *deer*, mouse deer and barking deer. The tree-tops are filled with the chatter of a host of monkeys, the most common being the white-handed gibbon, banded leaf monkey, dusky leaf monkey and siamang.

Walking in Taman Negara is an awesome experience for one not used to these the oldest forests of the world (130 million years). There is no sunlight on the forest floor. Dotted all over the park are many limestone caves like the big Gua Telinga, teeming with bats. A short walk along one of the many marked trails in the forest evokes haunting images -- figs strangling trees which strain upward for an inch of sunshine, water dripping from lianas and vines, legions of leeches everywhere -- all punctuated by flashes of colour, smells and sounds from the pheasants, orchids, and butterflies which colonise the jungle. Fishing is also an attraction up the Tahan and Tembeling rivers. The Sungei Tahan is a cola-black torrent full of the sporting kelah *(Tor tambriodes)* the Malaysian mahaseer. Shooting the rapids on the Tahan to Lata Berkoh is another great pastime. And if one has time, it takes a gruelling week to make a trip to climb Gunung Tahan in the North. (Guides are available for this supremely wild journey).

***"A short walk along one of the many marked trails in the forest evokes haunting images -- figs strangling trees which strain upward for an inch of sunshine, water dripping from lianas and vines, legions of leeches everywhere .."***

**Bako NP** is located in the state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo and contains some pristine riverine forests. Sarawak also has the **Mulu NP** which was only recently explored by a joint British-Malaysian expedition in 1980. The expedition discovered the 'Sarawak Chamber', the largest cave in the world, capable of garaging 7,500 buses.

**Kinabalu NP** is located in Kadazan tribal country in Sabah, the easternmost state of Malaysia. It is famous for the Mt. Kinabalu, an immense granite massif rising out of the plains of Sabah to 4,101 metres. The mountain is the highest in the region between the Himalaya and New Guinea. The park includes in its 754 sq. km. a range of vegetation types ranging from lowland dipterocarp forests (upto 912 metres) through montane oak forests (912 metres-1,824 metres), and mossy or cloud forests, (up from 1,824 metres) to alpine meadow plants and stunted bushes at the summit. Climbing Low's peak, the highest of the Kinabalu summits, has become a rite of passage for young Malaysians. Another special feature of this park is the presence of the largest flower in the world, the 'Stinking Corpse Lily' *(Rafflesia arnoldi)* which abounds at the Poring hot springs and produces flowers growing upto 45 cm. in diameter and weighing 1.5 kg.

Kinabalu Park is accessible by way of Kota Kinabalu (formerly Jessleton), a flourishing port city and capital of the frontier state of Sabah. Two hours driving from 'KK', the Park Headquarters is situated at the southern boundary at 1,524 metres. The HQ consists of several rest houses and bungalows catering to a variety of budgets. There are also many trails from the HQ into the surrounding oak forest. In the evening wildlife films are screened for the benefit of tourists at the park and the summit trail.

## Appeasing spirits

Climbing the summit trail is one of the major attractions of the park. One has to hire a guide from the Park HQ and then follow the Kambaronogoh road to the base of the mountain. From there on it is a steep uphill walk to the huts at Panar Laban ('Place of Sacrifice'), situated at 3,353 metres. The new, heated Laban Rata rest house at Panar Laban can accommodate upto 56 people. Panar Laban is high up on Kinabalu and from here one can see the summit if the cold Sabah mist would stay away! Panar Laban is famous for the annual Dusun sacrifice of a white cockerel and seven eggs to appease the spirits of Kinabalu ('Revered place of the Dead'').

The walk to Panar Laban, interspersed with breaks at the six shelters en route, is a fascinating experience. I was happy to see rhododendrons again after many seasons away from the Himalaya. And what a profusion -- *stenophyllum, fallacinum, buxifolium, lowii, retivenium, ericoides, and rugosum.* There is a lovely thing to do at 3,700 metres in Borneo; to sit in a heated room guzzling Sabah tea and watching the clouds go by Kinabalu. Tourism at Kinabalu is certainly well-organized. I was urged upwards by my Kadazan guide, Yukun, by the lure of earning a certificate of ascent upon my return (if I wasn't sacrificed).

From Panar Laban it is a couple of hours' walk to the summit to watch the sun rise over all of Sabah. Starting early (at 3 a.m. because of the wicked clouds of Sabah), one passes by the highest hut on the mountain called *Sayat-Sayat* because of the abundance of *Leptospermum* bushes at this altitude (Sayat in Dusun). The summit is really a bizarre feature. The rounded features, striations and grooves suggest glaciation, which occurred over 10,000 years ago. Sheer granite faces rise up on all sides as one struggles up the ropes to Low's Peak. One sees the eerie rock formations called Donkey's Ears which are said to move, and there is even a 'Pool of Sacrifice' at the foot of Low's Peak.

## Floral island

Kinabalu is an ecologist's paradise. Over half the plants found above 912 metres are endemic. Their closest relatives are found in New Guinea and the Himalaya. The mountain is a floral island isolated by lowland forests. Over 1,500 varieties of orchids, 40 species of oaks, and a number of endemic rhododendrons, conifers, and nepenthes (pitcher plants) grow along the slopes. The orangutan, honey bear, bearded pig, and the endemic Kinabalu rat are some of the rare mammals found here. In addition, two to three of the birds of Borneo live in the park. Some, like the Kinabalu friendly warbler and mountain blackbird are extremely rare and endemic to Borneo. It is indeed fortunate that the Malaysian Government decided to preserve Kinabalu as a NP in 1964.

***" In Sabah the government is engaged in a major conservation plan for the green and hawksbill turtles and three rookeries have been constituted into a NP near Sandakan."***

There are numerous other conservation areas in Malaysia which are accessible to visitors. Templer Park is one such on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur and provides a much needed respite from the sprawl of this growing vital city. The beaches of the north eastern part of the peninsula are nesting grounds for Ridley and leathery turtles which come to lay their eggs in the months of July and August. The Malaysian Government has set up a system whereby locals are paid to deposit eggs at hatching stations. As a result the trade in eggs has declined and turtle populations are recovering. In Sabah the government is engaged in a major conservation plan for the green and hawksbill turtles and three rookeries have been constituted into a NP near Sandakan.

The impressive thing about the NPs of Malaysia is their effectiveness in educating and accommodating a large number of visitors without damaging or compromising the principles of conservation on which they were founded. They have an impressive system of trails and transportation. Costs cater to a variety of budgets. Access to these parks is well-organized with excellent transportation systems.

At present these NPs do not face any major ecological threats because they are located in remote areas. With the rapid opening up of the country in the last few decades this may not long be the case as the proposed Endau-Rompin park demonstrates. In 1972 representatives of the Johor and Pahang governments had agreed to the creation of a second NP in the peninsula by 1980, in the Endau-Rompin area in the south. This area consisted of extensive virgin forests and was founded in 1977 to support a herd of 8-14 Sumatran rhinoceroses, possibly the last viable breeding population in the world. In 1977 the Pahang state government decided to log 12,141 ha. of the core area of the park in Pahang. After much public outcry and federal government remonstration, the state government finally halted the logging. Half the proposed area had already been logged by then to earn the state government M$3 million in revenue from premiums and timber taxes. A classic case of competing economic and conservation interests, which even affluent Malaysia is not exempt from !

## Problems

Since the early part of this century a number of developments have occurred to threaten the survival of many plant and animal species in Malaysia. The foremost among these is the rapid reduction in forest area and simultaneous destruction of forest habitat. Add to this logging (Malaysia is one of the largest timber exporters in the world), and the

ensuing forest disturbance has particularly affected birds (with very narrow ecological niches) and larger land mammals.

In an experiment in Selangor it was estimated that less than five per cent of the birds from a felled forest area could reestablish themselves in neighbouring forests. For the larger land mammals such as the banteng *(Bos javanicus)* and the Javan rhinoceros *(Rhinoceros sondaicus)* deforestation has completed what large-scale hunting had already begun. Both these species are no longer found on the peninsula. The Sumatran rhinoceros *(Didermocerus sumetrensis)* is on the verge of extinction, with a single breeding group surviving in the proposed **Endau-Rompin NP**, referred to previously. The elephant, seladang, and tiger are facing similar pressures although larger populations survive. Butterflies (especially the Rajah Brooke bird wing), corals, and several species of birds are threatened by collectors. Collecting has also seriously decimated populations of all four turtle species found in the peninsula, the leathery turtle *(Dermochelys olivacea)*, the green sea turtle *(Chelonia mydas)*, the Pacific Ridley turtle *(Lepidochelys olivacea)*, and the river terrapin *(Batugua baska)*. Finally, the widespread use of pesticides on plantations has resulted in the poisoning of many animals ranging from elephants to freshwater fishes. The spread of pollutants transported by the 42 'dead' rivers of the peninsula has also affected estuarine and near-shore species, like the dugong *(Halicore sumatrana)* which has disappeared from the peninsular waters.

***" In view of the damage to wildlife caused by deforestation, the Federal Government of Malaysia introduced a Protection of Wildlife Act in 1972."***

## Prospects

Although Malaysia has some of the best managed forests in the region, deforestation has proceeded apace as in the rest of South-East Asia. The country lost 255,000 ha. or 1.2 per cent of the total forest area in the period 1981-85. Conversion to plantations has been the major cause for deforestation -- accounting for some 90 per cent of the deforestation in the past decade. Unlike similar schemes in other parts of the world this process has operated in Malaysia with tremendous success. Over one million ha. of cash crops such as rubber and oil palm have been planted, creating jobs and earning the country valuable foreign exchange. What is said to be unique to Malaysia is that conversion of forest land to rubber plantations has not resulted in major soil depletion and is therefore seen as a sustainable process. However the development of plantations has occurred at the cost of genetic diversity -- 30 per cent of the natural forest of peninsular Malaysia has been lost between 1910 and 1980. No value can be placed on this loss.

In view of the damage to wildlife caused by deforestation, the Federal Government of Malaysia introduced a *Protection of Wildlife Act in 1972*. Under the provisions of this Act 35 wild animals are totally protected and another 34 are partially protected. In addition the Act provides for the establishment of wildlife reserves and sanctuaries. However, with the exception of the NPs, all of these can be de-gazetted by the respective state governments.

As for the damage to the land and erosion of the country's timber base, there are signs for hope with the passage of various pieces of legislation such as the *Environmental Quality Act (1974), National Forestry Policy (1977), and the National Parks Act (1980).*

It is hoped that the rising environmental consciousness among young Malaysians who are aware of the increasing number of environmental problems created by industrialization will help in the rediscovery of Malaysia's natural heritage in the country's NPs and wilderness areas. The process of popular stewardship of Malaysia's natural resources has already begun in the peninsula where citizen's groups have had a tremendous impact on the government's environmental policies. This has still to spread to Sabah and Sarawak where a tragic process of deforestation is taking place. India is obviously not alone in the conservation problems that loom large before the world.