Baram Heritage Survey- Decolonizing Assessments in Indigenous Territories

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The Borneo Project

Introduction

The Baram Heritage Survey (BHS) conducted 2 years of data collection in rural Indigenous communities of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. The project hired and trained local people to collect social, economic, and ecological data, incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and building community ownership of the project. The resulting 90-page atlases chronicle the sights, sounds, ecology and cultural values of some of Sarawak's last intact forests, as well as the daily life, resource use, and aspirations of the Indigenous communities living there. The BHS methodology provides an alternative way of conducting assessments that addresses many of the weaknesses that commonly occur in conventional assessments in Sarawak.

Weaknesses in assessment processes in Sarawak

Assessment processes in Indigenous communities in Sarawak, whether for logging, agricultural development, or infrastructure, historically exclude the same communities they are evaluating. Common issues with EIAs and SIAs include lack of clarity, opaque procedures, inaccessible documents, and low-quality participation.[1] Furthermore, a history of distrust between communities and extractive industries also creates challenges.

Opaque and confusing processes

Assessment processes are frequently inscrutable for communities. It may be unclear to participants who the consultants are, what they are doing, and why they are there. As one community leader explained, "Not all the villagers understand why these consultants come to do these social impact assessments…The real fact is that the kampong folks don't understand. These consultants however, rushing with their presentation and what they present, it is beyond their experiences. Moreover some are illiterate even though the consultants tried to explain through slide presentation."[2] Adding to the confusion around the objectives of consultation meetings, communities are normally not provided with the assessment documents, and are often unable to access reports, even when they formally request copies, including maps of their own territories and mitigation requirements.[3] This situation makes it functionally impossible for communities to verify or counter the findings and maps, or to monitor any mitigation processes or other agreements.

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[1]Sahabat Alam Malaysia. "Memorandum on Recommendations to Revamp the Environmental Impact Assessment Process in Sarawak." June 5, 2014. https://foe-malaysia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/140605_Memorandum_on_Improving_EIA_Process_in_Sarawak_Final.pdf. Accessed March 31, 2023.

[2] Community leader. Interview, conducted by Jettie Word, March 9, 2023.

[3] Sahabat Alam Malaysia. "Memorandum on Recommendations to Revamp the Environmental Impact Assessment Process in Sarawak." June 5, 2014. https://foe-malaysia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/140605_Memorandum_on_Improving_EIA_Process_in_Sarawak_Final.pdf. Accessed March 31, 2023.

Inadequate public participation

Inadequate public participation is visible in impact assessments and auditing reports. For example, a 2018 SIA for a 154,936 hectare logging concession in the Baram River Basin notes that a total of 55 respondents were interviewed in an area with an estimated population of at least 11,472.[4] The 55 respondents were largely a homogenous group: 94% were male, and 63% were above the age of 55. The report notes that no one was interviewed in 5 out of the 22 villages listed. In two of the villages only 2 people were interviewed. The author of the report explains that the SIA was conducted by two teams who split up to visit different communities. The author included community grievances that he heard into the SIA, however he excluded the grievances heard by the other team in order to "prevent misconception."

Auditors are unable to cross the river to visit the village for a consultation, so they interview the boat person instead.

Weak requirements for public participation impact the quality of EIAs in Sarawak. Unlike the federal processes, there is no public participation requirement for EIAs in Sarawak.[5] Furthermore, EIAs are not even required for logging concessions in primary forest; they are only necessary for re-entry or water catchment areas.[6]

Lack of trust in extractive industries

In the Baram area, failure to obtain adequate public participation goes hand in hand with a lack of trust regarding industrial logging and the consultations conducted or contracted by timber companies. Fear that participation in the consultation process will be equated with consent is documented in the above-mentioned 2018 SIA. As one community leader put it, "We are careful with any meeting invitations from the logging company. We are fed up with the dirty tricks of those who often look for opportunities to 'obtain' our Free, Prior and Informed Consent in

[4] "Social Impact Assessment Report for Communities Within and Adjacent to the Gerenai Forest Management Unit, Ulu Baram, Miri Division, Sarawak." October, 2018. Department of Forestry Science, University Putra Malaysia, Bintulu Sarawak Campus.

[5] Sahabat Alam Malaysia. "Memorandum on Recommendations to Revamp the Environmental Impact Assessment Process in Sarawak." June 5, 2014. https://foe-malaysia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/140605_Memorandum_on_Improving_EIA_Process_in_Sarawak_Final.pdf. Accessed March 31, 2023.

[6] Sarawak Timber Legality Verification System (STLVS). "Standard for Verification of Forest Management, Mill Operations, Trade & Customs."January 31, 2018, Version 01.

malicious ways. In the past, when we attended meetings with the logging company, they often took our presence there as an agreement to all their wishes or agenda without properly informing and consulting us via proper minutes of the meeting or with any other relevant documents."[7] The interviewee went on to explain that when people refused to fill out the questionnaires during a SIA, the consultants encouraged people to fill out questionnaires by giving the first 10 people to fill out the questionnaire some sort of prize, or "lucky draw". This community has experienced repeated violations of their land rights by the timber company over the years. Like many villages in the Baram area, they lack trust in assessment processes due to a history of land grabbing and the failure of the company to properly consult and obtain consent.

BHS: Decolonial Assessment Process and Data collection

The methodology of the BHS provides an alternative, decolonial approach to conduct surveys and assessments centered around public participation and community ownership. It is built around relationships of trust between stakeholders and emphasizes TEK. The survey itself was designed to support community-led projects in the Baram area regarding land rights, forest protection, and self-determination. It eliminates the lack of clarity and transparency often encountered in conventional EIAs and SIAs in Sarawak, while collecting accurate and abundant data and highlighting community knowledge.

For the BHS, communities decided for themselves to participate in the project, which they then co-designed alongside researchers and NGO partners. The communities, researchers, and NGOs together decided what data to collect, how to collect it, how to organize consultation meetings and trainings, and how to hire and manage field technicians. Not only was the assessment process demystified by community ownership and collaboration, the project also provided jobs and training. The communities identified field technicians who were hired and trained to collect wildlife data and interview community members. The research team cleaned, analyzed and returned the data to the communities, who are the owners of the information and decide how to share it.

Six villages from two different ethnic groups participated in the BHS. The villages were located in three main areas. The data collected was organized into three broad categories:

- **Animal data collection on transects:** Four transects in each of the three different sites were cleared to collect animal data, for a total of twelve transects. Each transect measured four kilometers long. For each site, three of the transect locations were randomly generated, and one was placed in an area of forest traditionally protected by the community. The technicians walked each transect twice per month: once to collect animal sightings and once to collect animal signs. They did this for a total of ten months over two years.
- **Socio-economic interviews:** Technicians conducted in-depth interviews with most of the people in their communities (about 80%) regarding resources use, income, farming,

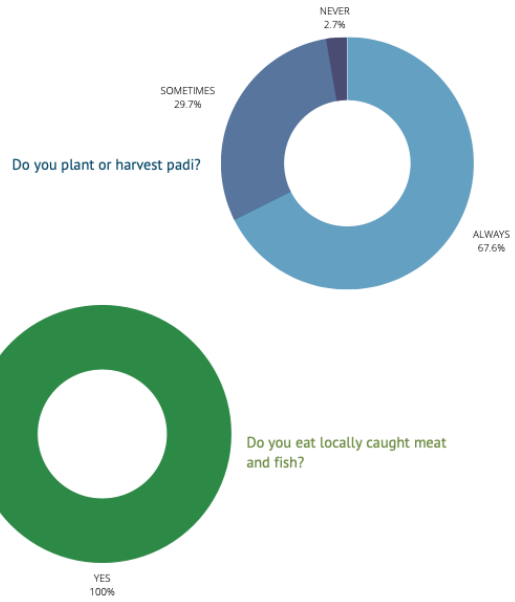
[7] Community leader. Interview, conducted by Celine Lim, March 9, 2023.

hunting and fishing practices, opinions about land-related issues, and visions for the future.

- **Hunting and Fishing returns**: Technicians documented hunting and fishing practices in their communities, surveying people upon their return to the village after going fishing or hunting.

Abundant, high quality data

The BHS collected an abundance of high-quality data. The results provide a comprehensive and accurate account of resource use, wildlife, household economics, and community aspirations. Compared to conventional SIAs, participation numbers are remarkably high. Wildlife numbers were much higher than a conventional EIA conducted in the same area in 2014.



Example of figures from BHS Atlas

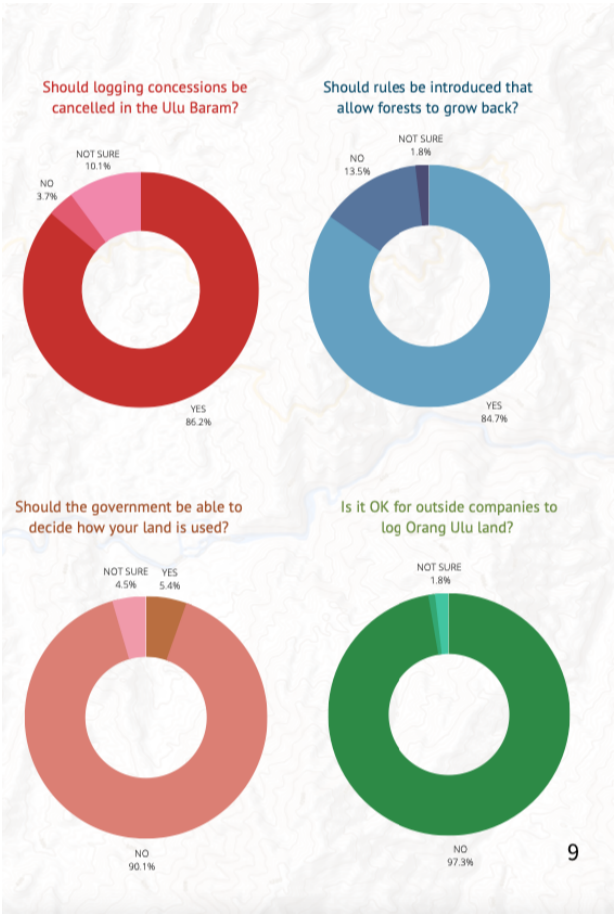
The 2014 EIA underplays the value of forests for communities and diminishes their reliance on forest resources for nutrition, explaining that hunting mammals is “less common”.[8] Similarly, a 2018 Public Summary of assessments for a logging concession in the area found that “the importance of hunting has diminished in recent years”and that “fishing is not an important activity in the FMU [Forest Management Area]”.[9] Conversely, the BHS found that 71% of people regularly go hunting, 94% regularly go fishing, and 100% of people rely on local fish and hunted meat as a regular part of their diet. The 2014 EIA states that over 100 people from local communities regularly work for the timber company, however the BHS found 0 people employed by the timber company: all household incomes are reliant on traditional livelihoods such as agriculture, hunting, fishing, and foraging. The EIA claimed that logging would raise household income, however the BHS found no increase in household income 6 years after the EIA was conducted.

The BHS found significantly more wildlife. The 2014 EIA states that totally protected fauna are rarely found in the project site, while the BHS found an abundance of protected fauna. The 2014 EIA found 29 Rare, Threatened, and Endangered (RTE) species, while the BHS found 39. The 2014 EIA claims that there are only 3 hornbill species in the logging concession area, while the BHS found an abundance of 6 hornbill species.

[8] “Environmental Impact Assessment for the Re-entry Hill Logging.”July, 2014. NREB Reference No: NREB/6-3/2H/37. Licensee: Samling Plywood (Miri) SDN BHD. Environmental Consultant: Ecosol Consultancy SDN BHD.

[9]Syarikat Samling Timber Sdn Bhd. “Public Summary: Forest Management Plan Gerenai Forest Management Unit for the period May 2018 to April 2027.”Edition 1,2.

The abundance and quality of wildlife data collected through the BHS could be attributed to the skills of the technicians and the time spent collecting data along transects. All of the field technicians were local hunters with an incredible knowledge of the flora and fauna. They were highly skilled in identifying wildlife, for instance they all could easily replicate all 6 hornbill calls, and were highly-skilled in detecting animal signs and sightings. They also spent a significant amount of time collecting data along the transects over a period of two years. Moreover, timber companies and their contractors could have an incentive to find fewer protected species and less community reliance on resources, as that reduces their responsibility to mitigate the negative impacts of logging.



Example of figures from BHS Atlas

Citizen Science

Participatory science, or citizen science, is an increasingly popular tool for researchers to collect data as a way to increase public participation and gather large amounts of data. BHS technicians were chosen by their communities for their skills as hunters and organizers. They participated in a 4-day training and several follow-up trainings. Cybertracker, the app employed in the BHS, used images, local languages, and diagrams to make data collection more accessible. The data was regularly collated and analyzed for errors. If systematic errors were found, technicians were given a refresher on data collection procedures.

In a review of the accuracy of citizen science data in the areas of ecology and environmental science, Aceves-Bueno et al (2017) found that accuracy is improved with longer participation length, prior training program, conducting research related to volunteers' economic and health situations, and monitoring in terrestrial environments.[10] All of these elements characterize the BHS.

[10] Aceves-Bueno, E., Adeyemi A., Feraud, M., Huang, Y., Tao, M., Yang, Y., and Andersong, S., 2017. The Accuracy of Citizen Science Data: Quantitative Review. *Bulletin Ecological Society of America*. 98:278-290.

Community ownership and capacity building
Community involvement and relationship-building between stakeholders ensured high participation in the socio-economic interviews. Many meetings were held between researchers, supporting organizations, village leaders, and village members over multiple years to discuss the project. Socio-economic interviews were conducted by trained community members after several community-wide meetings in which the communities were informed about the project and chose to participate in the process. This is a very different experience than outside consultants arriving at the village for a consultation, often without giving prior notice.

In addition to collecting accurate and abundant data, the BHS increased community capacity to participate in future projects. Communities are more informed about surveys and assessment processes in general, and they are equipped with the resulting data and analyses from the BHS. BHS data can help verify or counter claims made in future assessment processes. Furthermore, the field technicians may be able to use their skills in future projects, and are indeed being hired for such purposes.

The BHS provides an example of how to address the serious shortcomings in conventional assessments in Sarawak. It demystifies the process, ensures community collaboration, collects abundant and accurate data, and increases community capacity. Co-collaboration builds trust in communities who have learned to be wary of outside consultants. While the effort to build trust between stakeholders and incorporate communities as collaborators takes more time than conventional methods, the process yields higher quality data, healthier relationships between stakeholders, and informed and empowered communities.