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# Biodiversity and Logging

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Jeffery Evans

This essay centers on biodiversity and logging in Malaysia's rain-forests, but first I will begin with some observations one might write on the back of postcards.

It is a ninety-minute taxi ride from downtown Kuala Lumpur to the banks of the Sungai Selangor River. In the dark of a warm evening, we step onto a twenty-foot battery powered boat. The boat driver's face is anonymous in the dark. He says nothing, not even welcome, as we leave the dock. The boat drifts silently with the current. Two hundred yards down river is a tree covered with fireflies. Incredibly, they are all blinking on and off at the same time. Another two hundred yards and another tree filled with fireflies blinking in synchrony. It is as though the trees are draped in Christmas tree lights. Insects chirp in the jungle, things go bump in the night, yet we in the boat are totally silent, mouths hung open in amazement. For perhaps the first time in Macalester's history, five faculty and staff are speechless for twenty minutes. Our guide/pilot never says a word, letting the fireflies, the river, and the sounds of the night speak for themselves.

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A mile from the giant Petronas Twin Towers in downtown Kuala Lumpur is a small island of green surrounded by six lanes of traffic. Bird watching one morning, I am pleasantly surprised to see brightly colored kingfishers, flycatchers, and mynas in the heart of the city. What I wasn't prepared for was seeing a troop of monkeys swinging from limb to limb and looking for all the world like they were in the heart of the jungle.

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The campus of the University of Sains Malaysia in Penang is much like a campus one would find at Macalester College or the University of Minnesota; well-tended gardens, old trees, curving lanes, and modern brick buildings. Near the Social Science building is a small ravine, a perfect place to have a cup of coffee and listen to the birds at sunrise. Each song is new and beautiful. That is expected. What I didn't expect is the beauty of the chant of the call to worship broadcast through loudspeakers at the campus mosque.

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It is midnight and I am running through the jungle with two Borneo tribesmen. Armed with flashlight and machetes, we are looking for frogs. We switch off our lights to see the stars and in front of us is a phosphorescent mushroom, glowing as brightly as a computer screen.

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It is the unexpected: fireflies, monkeys, the call to worship, and glowing mushrooms that make travel so enjoyable. Another unexpected sight, this one disturbingly familiar, is how much Malaysia is like Minnesota. No, certainly not the housing (no screens on the windows, no insulation, no furnaces) and not the gardens in January (it seems every surface is covered by some plant—orchids, vines, ferns, and palms). It is the landscape that is disturbing. In southern Minnesota and throughout the Midwest one sees row upon row of corn. In Malaysia, there are miles of row after row of palm oil plantations. The towering red and white pine of northern Minnesota are now replaced by aspen and birch. Giant Malaysian trees draped with vines are now replaced by scrub jungle. Like Minnesota, most of peninsular Malaysia has been logged. The forests of eastern Malaysia are rapidly disappearing.<sup>1</sup> As these forests disappear, so, too, does the most valuable, yet unrecognized, resource of Malaysia: its biodiversity.

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In a 25-acre plot in the Minnesota north woods, one might find five different species of trees. On a 25-acre plot in Sarawak, the Royal Geo-

graphical Society identified 800 species.<sup>2</sup> There are 20,000 species of flowering plants in Sarawak, hundreds of species of butterflies, and more than a hundred types of fruiting trees. Along the muddy Baram River in Sarawak, thick with runoff from logging operations, huge timbers are stacked on the banks. Much of the rainforest — that took ten million years to grow and develop this incredible biodiversity — has fallen to the chainsaw and bulldozer in two decades. It is wishful thinking that it will recover in hundreds or even thousands of years. Kim Worm Sorensen, Chief Technical Adviser for the Danish Co-operator for Environment and Development, estimates the rates of extinction in rainforests worldwide to be six species per hour.<sup>3</sup>

Harvard professor and author Edward O. Wilson wrote, “Species destruction is the one folly our descendants are least likely to forgive.”<sup>4</sup> No doubt everyone is aware of the ethical and aesthetic reasons for preserving biodiversity. What gets peoples’ attention, as it should, is when the argument is personalized. Perhaps you know of a child who survived childhood leukemia thanks to the rosy periwinkle, a small pink plant that grows only in Madagascar. The corn you had last night for dinner might contain genes for disease resistance obtained from a rare species of wild corn found only on a few acres in Mexico. Drug researchers and plant geneticists don’t randomly mix up compounds in a lab. Usually, their starting point uses what nature and its incredible chemical factories known as plants have already manufactured.

In the late 1980s, Senator Al Gore proposed legislation banning wood imports from Malaysia, then seen as one of the worst destroyers of rainforest in Southeast Asia.<sup>5</sup> I was curious to see if Malaysian logging policies have changed. I talked with timber industry officials, government foresters, indigenous people, loggers, environmental group representatives, scientists, cab drivers, and farmers. Some have served time in jail for their work. Others have had their passports revoked by the government. In order to protect them, I will avoid quoting some of them by name. In my inquiry, I found reasons not to be optimistic.

- Malaysia has many laws aimed at ensuring responsible logging. Unfortunately, those laws are frequently ignored, as forestry officials look the other way. We don’t take bribes, one government official told me, but large “gifts” are common.
- Logging in Malaysia is quite different than logging in Minnesota. Due to the incredible biodiversity, there may be only five mer-

chantable trees per acre whereas Minnesota would have hundreds of the same species. Removing a giant of the forest in Malaysia may eliminate the only seed source for miles around. As it falls, the vines tangling the branches pull down other trees as well. In order to drag the logs out of the rainforest, bulldozers and skidders have to be used, resulting in even greater environmental damage.

- A worldwide sustainable forestry practice is to cut an amount equal to or less than the growth rate of the forest. So if a forest is growing at 5 percent, you cut 5 percent or less. Malaysian loggers may be cutting 5 percent, but it is 100 percent of certain species and not 5 percent spread out over many species.
- Philip Hurst writes in *Rainforest Politics*: “It is an open secret that timber concessions are handed out in East Malaysia as a means of strengthening political allegiances or as rewards for favors. Timber concessions in Sarawak cost nothing; they may be distributed by the Chief Forester or Chief Minister. Concessions may also be revoked by these individuals who thus have tremendous influence over development policy within each state.”<sup>6</sup>
- Concessionaires have a limited time, usually ten years, to get the timber cut—hardly enough time to encourage sustainable harvesting.
- Even if the federal government developed stricter logging guidelines, forestry policy in Malaysia is determined by the state governments. Tax receipts from logging are the major source of income in the East Malaysia states of Sabah and Sarawak.
- Malaysia is currently developing logging standards to obtain certification from the Forest Stewardship Council, a worldwide certifying agency. This certification assures consumers that the wood is harvested in a sustainable and responsible manner. It requires the participation and consensus of groups representing the environment, industry, and the rights of native people. The process has become bogged down because non-governmental organizations representing indigenous people have withdrawn from the negotiations, saying their concerns were not adequately addressed.
- The Malaysian Constitution guarantees land rights to native people. These rights are rarely upheld and for four decades the mode of operation is for timber companies to log first and ask permission later. There is hope, however. A Sarawak High Court ruling, issued

May 12, 2001, upheld the customary land rights of the Iban Village Rumah Nor, finding that the Borneo Paper and Pulp Company did not have the right to destroy Rumah Nor's rainforest. The decision expands the definition of customary land holdings to include rivers, streams, and communal forests. Prior to the ruling, only farmlands actively cultivated by forest-dependent communities could be considered native customary lands.<sup>7</sup>

- Will consumers in Japan, China, the U.S., and elsewhere, be willing to buy certified wood products? So far, according to Barney Chen, Director of the Sarawak Timber Association, consumers haven't been willing to pay a premium for certified wood.<sup>8</sup>
- Can certified (and taxed) lumber compete with the huge amount of illegal logging in Indonesia and Myanmar (Burma)?<sup>9</sup>

Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir, says that Western concern about environmental issues is a form of hypocrisy because logging began in Sabah and Sarawak by the British Borneo Timber Company in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup>

I hope the reader does not receive the wrong impression. Malaysia is not a land of stumps and ruts. Malaysia has set aside over five million acres for parks. It is a place whose beauty is exceeded only by the friendliness of its people. Prime Minister Mahathir is right. We are hypocrites. We talk about the importance of preserving biodiversity, yet we are rarely willing to pay for it.

An age-old problem faced by accountants and economists is determining the true cost of a product. How do we take into account the cost of polluted waters, destroyed habitats, and lost species, species that might cure cancer or halt Alzheimer's disease or boost corn production? For the logger trying to scratch out a living in the rainforest or for the consumer buying tropical hardwood porch furniture what matters is today.

### **More Postcards from Malaysia**

At one of the seminars in Penang, Data'Dr. Toh Kin Woon, Economist and Senior State Minister, Penang, said the Malaysian economy is between a rock and a hard place (my wording, not his). Malaysian workers can no longer compete with the low cost labor of Indonesia or China, yet they don't have the research and engineering skills to offer

value added services. "The solution," he said, "is to, build more 'Harvards' in Malaysia." It seems like a simple solution until one considers who would attend, and how to ensure that they remain once they are trained. It is a fascinating and complex problem, one that involves religion, culture, politics, economics, and the environment. (As income and education rise, so does the demand for a clean and healthy environment.) One thing among many that I take back to the classroom from Malaysia is the importance of broadly based liberal arts education if we want our students to be good citizens and leaders.

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One Sunday afternoon, four of us huff and puff our way up a small mountain outside Georgetown. On the path are families, teenagers, the elderly and the ancient, all slowly but steadily making their way up the dirt path to the top. As we climb higher, the view of Georgetown and the South Channel is spectacular. At the top, instead of T-shirt and trinket shops, there is simply free ginger tea. The water, fuel, cups, and tea are all carried to the top by volunteers. On that hill some find challenge, others find beauty in nature. Permeating it all is an incredible spirit of cooperation. Perhaps there is reason to be optimistic after all.



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## Notes

1. Eastern Malaysia is located 350 miles east of peninsular Malaysia on the island of Borneo, the world's third largest island. Eastern Malaysia consists of two states: Sabah and Sarawak. They are located on the northwestern side of the island. The other half of Borneo belongs to Indonesia.
2. The Royal Geographical Study is quoted in Stan Sesser, *The Lands of Charm and Cruelty, Travels in Southeast Asia* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).
3. *New Straits Times* (15 January 2002).
4. Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
5. Interview with Barney Chen, Director of Sarawak Timber Association (14 January 2002).
6. Philip Hurst, *Rainforest Politics* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1989).
7. Harlan Thompson, "Landmark Ruling Secures Native Land Rights" (23 May 2001). The Borneo Project Online Newsletter ([www.earthisland.org/borneo/news/articles](http://www.earthisland.org/borneo/news/articles)).
8. Interview with Barney Chan, Director Sarawak Timber Association (14 January 2002).
9. Ibid.
10. Lonely Planet, *Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei* (Oakland: Lonely Planet Publications, 2001).