

## Impacts of Forest Changes on Indigenous People Livelihood in Pekan District, Pahang

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### Abstract

The forest cover change in the region due to timber extraction and change of land use pattern in the region have brought certain impacts on the livelihood of indigenous people. These people who once highly depended on the forest resources are the most affected. This study was done with the purpose to reveal the importance of forest as a source of their basic need and income for indigenous people and their future generation through the lens of history and place. A qualitative study had been done on the indigenous people that live in three villages in Pekan District, Pahang. Qualitative approach using face-to-face interview was applied to gather the oral history on the impacts of forest change at their place. It shown that forest change has much more impacts on the forest depended communities in the fringe of forests. A small tabletop recorder was used to record the interview session. This study could provide valuable inputs to government and other stakeholders on managing issues related to indigenous people, environment and their culture.

**Keywords:** Indigenous people; forest change; livelihood

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### 1. Introduction

The indigenous people have been linked to the forest due to their livelihood highly depending on the forest resources. The development in the forest areas has seen a dramatically change on the forest ecosystem and this change has created much impacts on the indigenous people who are still depending on them. In the peat swamp forest of Pekan District, Pahang, the forest is laid within the forest reserves and state land forest, which are subjects to logging using sustainable approach and also conversion into agricultural land (FRIM, 2004). Nevertheless, this forest is also within the home range of Jakun people, one of the indigenous people.

According to Gill (2005), the Jakun people, one of the sub-groups of the orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia, traditionally practiced shifting cultivation as well as foraging forest product and fishing as a means of economic sustenance. The forest, as well as providing a wealth of material outputs of subsistence or commercial value, is the basis for livelihood systems based on hunting and gathering, or for the rotational agriculture systems that depend on the availability of bush fallow to revive the productivity of the land (Byron and Arnold, 1999). Forest products include everything else, from roots, fruits, and (sometimes) fish and game or 'bushmeat' used for foods, through a range of medical plants, resins and essential oils valuable for their chemical components, to fibers such as bamboos, rattans and other palms used for weaving and structural

applications (Belcher, 2003).

The majority of the Jakun today no longer practices the traditional cycle of agricultural work but instead rely on gathering of forest products such as asam kelubi (*Eleiodoxa conferta*), fish, rattan and wild games. The communities along Bebar River claimed that the resources, both fish, wild games or rattan, have been depleted and their harvests were declining compared to the past (Junaenah *et al.*, 2005). The Jakun wanted the forests to be conserved as it is their source of livelihood and for the benefit of their future generations. They have voiced out against logging or conservation of land uses, and are willing to assist the government as well as relevant agencies in conserving their traditional homeland.

The land where they have been used for generations are not only their livelihood dependency but also their heritage. The heritage of indigenous people comprise of all objects, sites and knowledge found in their surroundings and transmitted from generation to generation (Nicholas, 2002). Even though they did not physically demarcate their lands as their territory, they were well understood the extent of their custom lands and the resources they could find there. They understood that the land should not be harm. Yet, these communities and their lifestyles are as well subjected to development. The development of social phenomena, similar to evolution in nature, is a transition from past to future, which is known as history. By capturing the events and document them, the unwritten records of them could be used to trace back or link them with their surroundings.

## 2. Research questions

The impacts of forest changes have certain effects on the livelihood of indigenous people. Therefore, key events on this issue are the turning point, which is important. How much such change has affected their livelihood is needed to be documented. Also, there is a lack of understanding the main reason behind this change according to the people perspective. Thus, this study tends to provide general assessment on the forest development on indigenous people livelihood from historical perspectives.

## 3. Objectives

To provide general assessment on the forest development on indigenous people livelihood from historical perspective

## 4. Methodology

An oral history method was used to capture the data from the indigenous people through interview. According to Moyer (1993), an oral history approach is a systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Through this approach, researchers have to formulate the central questions or issue, capture the events in the interview session, verify their findings, analyze and place them in an accurate historical context. During the interview session, interviewer should not display his or her historical knowledge or argue with the interviewee.

In this study, three villages which represented undeveloped, developing and developed stages of Orang Asli settlements in Pekan District were identified with the assistant from the respective agency in charge of Orang Asli's welfare, Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JHEOA). The three villages are Kampung Selingkong, Kampung Meranti and RPS Runchang (Fig. 1). All settlements are at close approximately to the peat swamp forests. The settlers were known from a higher to lower degree in forest resource dependency (JHEOA Pekan, 2004). Kampung Selingkong represented the undeveloped where it only has few permanent houses built using durable materials with no running water or electricity. The development of this settlement was still in planning stage. Only three houses were provided to the settlers during the survey. The road leading to this settlement was depended on the former logging road. On the other hand, Kampung Meranti represented a developing settlement, where the houses are built by the authority and made available to them even though there was still some shortage of houses. There was no running water but electricity was

available optionally. Telephone line is available to the subscriber. Asphalt road from the main trunk road is also available. A multipurpose hall was built by the authority. The most developed Orang Asli settlement in Pekan District was Runchang, which is developed under regrouping scheme for the settlers in 1986. Gathered from various places near here, the settlers were invited to settle in this place rather than in the fringe of the forest or inside the forest. Houses are made available for them. Each house comes with individual well for water supply. A permanent running water system was in its planning stage during the survey. Beside accessible road, rural clinic, multipurpose hall, shop lot and school are available inside the settlement.

Interviewees were selected with the assistant of local chief (*Tok Batin*) or his representatives in the case of his absentee (Plates 1 and 2). Normally, an elder person was chosen without gender selective. Five persons were chosen from each settlement because, usually, sufficient and useful information was obtained at this saturation point. A saturation point is the threshold point where same answer was obtained from different people for the same question. To assist in capturing the interview session, a voice recorder was used. This allows the researcher to capture the contents with minimizing the lost of verbal information at the scene.

The interview session were designed to elicit the individual's perceptions of their experiences without emphasizing on the veracity of dates of events. Questions were open-ended and participants were encouraged to wander down the sideline memories to help them in remember the event. However, the interviewer might have to confine the session within the topics of discussion to reduce potentially out of topics.

## 4. Results

All the interviewees in Kampung Selingkong and Kampung Meranti mentioned about the catastrophe, big flood of 1970s, in the turning point of forest change and impacts on their livelihood. Their villages were resettled to the current location because of the flood. Their villages are now much further away from the forest. One of the responses from Kampung Meranti was "A long time ago, lots of trees behind my house, nowadays no more because of that flood. Even, the school also destroyed (due to the flood)." Another response from Kampung Selingkong referring to this topic was "Long ago, whatever (we) want to eat, just had to go to forest. Must able to catch small animals like mouse-deer.... porcupine, but nowadays wouldn't guarantee catching anything if going into the forest."

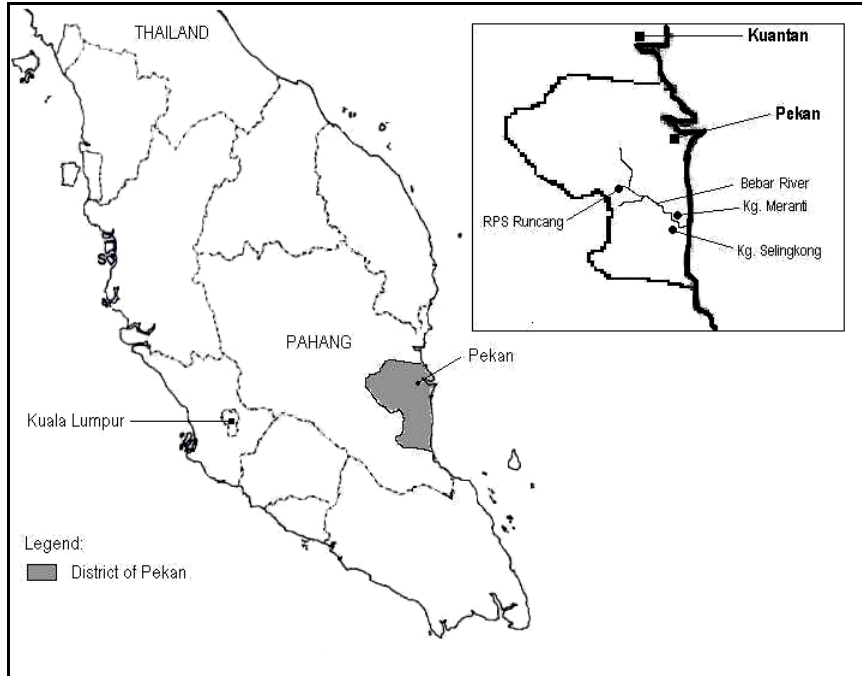


Figure 1. Study Area



Plate 1: Interview with Tok Batin of Kampung Meranti



Plate 2: Interview with Tok Batin representative of Kampung Selingkong

In addition, recent logging and land conversion to agricultural purposes in the areas also contributed another wave of impacts on their forest resource-based livelihood (FRIM, 2004). These impacts were much greater in Kampung Selingkong and Kampung Meranti. Due to forest resources declining which they once highly depend on, they were unable to generate income used to be and getting food sources easily from the forest. From their responses, “Nowadays to earn RM10 in a single day is so difficult” and “Nowadays, everything needs to buy. Not like the old days. Having small amount of money also not a big deal” had shown their difficulties in generating cash income from the forests. Additionally, some of them felt the change of their

environment. One of them in Kampung Selingkong stated that “last time there were lots of trees (around the village)... the weather was not warm as nowadays” to compare the warming surrounding because of land around their settlement cleared.

However, not all felt the negative impacts of land conversion for agriculture, especially from RPS Runcang. One response from this place stated that “We don’t mind forest is being developed as long as our lifestyles are getting better just like others.” This might due to some of the settlers here have received assistants and financial benefits from agricultural from FELCRA, a corporate that consolidates agricultural land and manage it for its members for cash crops, since

1989 (JHEOA Pekan, 2004). They were happy that the corporate pays them monthly dividend from selling the oil palm. Another person mentioned "Last time my income not like nowadays. My current income is much better than last time." They could get about RM400.00 for their monthly dividend and a bonus of RM1000.00 at year end without working in the estate.

The changes of land use and development in this area for about three decades had caused some impacts on the indigenous people livelihood. Interviews with the Orang Asli reveal several regional issues that fabricate these changes. Due to 1970s big flood, their settlements have shifted to current location, which is much further away from the forests. Continuing of land conversion into agricultural land and follow with logging activities in the recent time has been further reducing the resources that they used to depend on. Shifting of forest dependent communities to agrarian was observed. Permanent agricultural practices are able to secure their livelihood as compare to forest products gathering. They were mainly planting yam, lemon grass, cassava, and banana. They might earn between RM200 to RM400 a month.

## 5. Conclusion

Forest change for the past decades has brought many impacts to the indigenous livelihood. The main events that have occurred which altered their livelihood are flood in 1971, conversion of forest to agricultural land throughout the period and recent logging activities (2000s). Some received negative impacts from these events are lost of income generations and food supply. This could be seen from two of the settlements, Kampung Selingkong and Kampung Meranti, which represent undeveloped and developing stages. However, some perceived positive impacts gained from the commercial agricultural practices. This was seen from RPS Runchang, a developed indigenous people's settlement. It has shown that the people not against development if the development would bring benefits to them.

## 6. Recommendation

Relevant agencies in land development in the forest may need to work together in order to reduce the impacts of indigenous people livelihood. The development should include the indigenous people for minimizing the impacts on them. At the same time, suitable capacity buildings for the people should be identified for having relevant courses and assistant to them.

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