

The Unseen, Unheard, and Misunderstood: What Can we Learn from a Social History of Property Relations?

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In 1990 a prominent politician from Sabah, Malaysia proudly announced at an international conference on conservation and biodiversity that he intended to expand the boundaries of Kinabalu Park¹ to include an area, locally known as *Bukit Hempuan* (Hempuan Hill), that supported species-rich tropical forests.² Shortly after this announcement, two-thirds of Bukit Hempuan was burned to the ground, allegedly by local people. Prominent biologists and politicians were furious that local people could act so destructively. The plans to include the once-valuable forests in Kinabalu Park had to be dropped.

Both politicians and biologists failed to understand why people burned the area; they failed to consider the social history of resource use on Bukit Hempuan. The government never openly acknowledged the fact that, prior to the formation of the Kinabalu Park in 1963, local people hunted and collected forest products there. This is not to suggest that policy makers were *unaware* of the local uses of the area. In 1962 the following was written about the southern boundary of the then proposed park, which bordered the town of Kundasang:

“It is uninhabited...though there is a Dusun path called Jalan Dili³....[The area is a] rich breeding ground for animals. Jalan Dili is used by hunters, collectors of damar (gum of *Agathis*) and collectors of rattan. Pigs, barking deer, and sumbar⁴ were conspicuous. It is considered to be the chief breeding ground for large mammals around Kinabalu....The question on hunting rights may be difficult. It may be necessary along the southern boundary to establish a buffer zone where pig and deer can be shot and where timber may be extracted for house building. At Kundasang there were signs of agitation among villagers, and new ‘rentis’ (path) had been cut in the forest clearly as an endeavor to strike out claims before it might be too late...⁵”

During the formation of the Park these customary rights were disregarded, a buffer zone was never established, and any collection of timber, forest products and hunting was strictly prohibited in the Park.

Present day policy makers and government officials also ignored the fact that Bukit Hempuan had already been *included* in Kinabalu Park in 1963 when the boundaries were originally drawn and that documentation of prior customary rights to this area existed. They overlooked the fact that in 1984 Bukit Hempuan had been *removed* from the Park so that individuals close to Chief Minister Harris could log the forest for valuable *Agathis* trees. After the valuable logs were removed and the land was abandoned by politicians, local villagers “reclaimed” sections of this region, as they

slowly encroached on the boundaries of Kinabalu Park for shifting cultivation. And when the politician wanted to take the land back again in 1990, people were angry. This entire history of informal and formal changes in the property rights and means of access to Bukit Hempuan was ignored when the politician made what he considered a generous gesture indicating his dedication to the conservation of biodiversity.

For the people in this area, this gesture was the last straw. They had given up the land to the Kinabalu Park in 1963. No one had publicly contested its removal from the Park in 1984 for the benefit of political elites. None of the politicians had asked whether the local people needed the land more than the already wealthy politicians. And no one dared suggest that the rural population might need the land more than the rare tropical plants did. But when the government threatened to unilaterally take away land that local people needed and had reclaimed, they acted. Burning the remaining forest seemed to be the only way that they could maintain control over the land. And it succeeded.⁶ Ironically, it was the state’s project of protection that resulted in the destruction of Bukit Hempuan.

This story illustrates the importance of understanding the broader historical and political-economic circumstances that influence current land use strategies and property regimes in Sabah, as in many developing countries. Without this understanding, the actions of local villagers may seem unconnected, irrational, self-defeating and illogical. Without this understanding, politicians and biologists fail to realize that a “simple” gesture of moving the boundaries of the Park to include a single hillside could result in the destruction (at least temporarily) of that hillside.

Endnotes

¹ Mount Kinabalu is the highest peak in Southeast Asia and supports a rich and unique botanical community (See Beaman and Beaman 1990; Davis, Heywood, and Hamilton 1995). It is also one of the primary tourist destinations in Malaysia. In 1995 there were over 146,000 visitors to Kinabalu Park.

² In a 1984 report on “Bukit Hempuan and its Botanical Significance,” Dr. John Beaman (a prominent botanist who has made the study of the botany of Mount Kinabalu part of his life’s work) wrote about the many rare and endemic

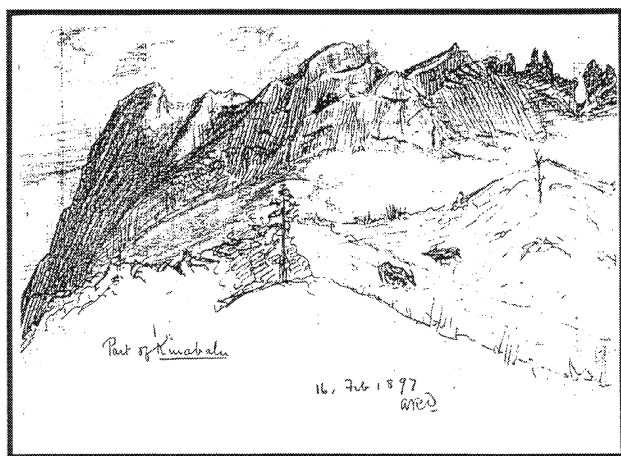
species found on Bukit Hempuan. He believes that this report may have been a significant part of the motivation for including Bukit Hempuan in the Park (Dr. John Beaman, personal communication, March 8, 1997).

³ *Jalan* is the Malay word for path or road.

⁴ The Malay word, *sumbar* or *sambar* refers to a large deer (*Cervis unicolor*).

⁵ “The Royal Society of North Borneo Expedition Committee, September 1962, Report to the H.E. Governor of North Borneo on the proposed National Park of Kinabalu.” Draft of an unpublished manuscript, no page numbers.

⁶ One question remains unanswered in my search for understanding of the order of events surrounding the burning of Bukit Hempuan: Were the fires set intentionally, or were they swidden fires that accidentally burned out of control? Or were they swidden fires that were *allowed* to burn out of control? The fires coincided with a month or more of drought. The drought, coupled with the damage done by the logging undoubtedly helped the fire burn hotter (J. Beaman, personal communication, March 8, 1997). Most people in Sabah, both politicians and local villagers, are quick to suggest that the fires were set intentionally. This story of the act of resistance by locals has entered the realm of local lore. Both politicians and locals use the story to make a point. Politicians draw on this story to show that local people will never manage and conserve resources without government intervention. Locals tell and retell the story to show that they too have power, and will no longer sit by while politicians take away their land.



Mount Kinabalu with water buffalo grazing in the foreground, February 16, 1897, sketch from the personal diary of Mr. W.R. Dunlop

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