

Lund University  
Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies  
Masters Programme in Asian Studies  
East Asian Track  
Fall Semester, 2005

# **A Case Study of Ecotourism in the Kelabit Highlands**

***Is it Sustainable?***

Author: Christopher Rodger  
Supervisor: Stefan Eklöf

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine ecotourism in the Kelabit Highlands, Malaysia, in terms of the sustainability of the industry. The empirical material, which is based on interviews carried out in the field, is analysed within the context of sustainable development theory in order to examine the central and most critical factors in determining the long-term future of ecotourism in the Kelabit Highlands, and in particular how these factors are likely to affect tourism patterns and the structure of the tourism industry in this region. The central conclusion drawn is that the geographic isolation of the area and the logging of the Kelabit communal forests are the two most critical factors impacting upon the tourism industry in the Kelabit Highlands. These two issues will be central in determining the future direction of tourism in this area and ultimately if ecotourism in the Kelabit Highlands is sustainable.

# Table of contents

- Introduction ..... 4**
  - Objectives .....5
  - Methodology .....5
  - Limitations .....6
- Sustainable Development..... 7**
  - Pro-poor Growth.....8
  - Sustainable Tourism .....8
  - Ecotourism .....9
- The Kelabit Highlands ..... 11**
- Who Benefits Economically from Tourism in the Kelabit Highlands? ..... 14**
  - Pro-Poor Tourism .....14
  - The Structure of the Tourism Industry in the Kelabit Highlands.....15
    - Accommodation Providers.....15
    - Guides .....16
    - Involvement of Villagers .....17
    - Involvement of Local Businesses .....18
- Logging ..... 19**
  - Possible Impacts of Logging on the Kelabit Highlands and ecotourism.....19
  - Tourism and Logging.....21
- Isolation ..... 24**
  - The Impact of Geographic Isolation upon Ecotourism.....24
    - e-Bario.....25
    - The Road.....26
- Policy Suggestions ..... 30**
  - Information.....30
  - Local Involvement.....31
  - e-Bario .....32
  - Land Tenure .....32
- Conclusion ..... 33**
- Bibliography ..... 35**

## Introduction

Tourism is the world's largest single industry and job creator. The tourism sector is estimated to account for 10.6% of global Gross Domestic Product, 8.3% of global employment and is expected to generate US\$ 6201.49 billion in economic activity in 2005 (World Travel and Tourism Council 2005). Furthermore, tourism's contribution to the global economy is expected to increase in importance, as it is estimated that the industry will have a long term annual growth rate of 4.1%. This will result in the number of global international arrivals increasing from the year 2000 figure of 703 million to over 1 billion in 2010 and reaching 1.6 billion by the year 2020 ( World Tourism Organisation 2005). This growth in the number of international travellers has been largely facilitated by increased income and leisure time, together with rapid and dramatic improvements in communications and transport technologies, which have raised public awareness of the diversity of cultures and landscapes that exist in the world, and made these destinations much more readily accessible.

Ecotourism has developed as a response to the perceived negative effects of mass or conventional tourism, such as damage to natural environments and host communities, combined with an increased demand from consumers to escape increasingly crowded tourist destinations and experience natural landscapes and lifestyles very different from their own. This process has been further driven by the tourism industry eager to capture, promote and consolidate this growing niche market.

Malaysia is ideally placed to take advantage of this increased interest in ecotourism, as it possesses a wide variety of natural land and marine habitats, spectacular wildlife, diverse indigenous ethnic groups and cultures, and a rich history. Both the Malaysian Government and tourism industry have recognised the importance and profitability of the ecotourism segment of the tourism industry. As a result, ecotourism has become a central component in the promotion and marketing of Malaysia as a tourist destination.

## **Objectives**

The intent of this paper is to examine to what degree tourism in the Kelabit Highlands is sustainable. This is achieved by analysing the structure of the local tourism industry in order to elucidate who benefits financially from tourism in the Kelabit Highlands and how this structure affects the sustainability or otherwise of the industry. Next, the most critical factors in determining the long-term future of tourism in the region, that is, the steady encroachment of logging in the area and the geographic isolation of the Highlands are examined, and their likely impact on the creation of a sustainable tourism industry discussed. Lastly, a number of policy suggestions that could be utilised in helping to build a more robust, resilient and ultimately sustainable tourism industry in the Kelabit Highlands are presented. Sustainable development and more particularly, sustainable tourism practises, are used as the framework within which the tourism industry in the Kelabit Highlands is analysed.

## **Methodology**

Methodology is important because it is a practical means of connecting theory with real phenomena (Alvesson and Sköldböck 2000:1-5). The type of methodology employed has consequences throughout a research project. It is important in the selection, formulation, construction, analysis, interpretation and reporting of such a study. My preferred method to examine my research questions is to carry out a single case study. This is a popular choice of research strategy for researchers that need to understand complex social phenomena and is a holistic research strategy (Yin 1989:14). The purpose of undertaking a single case study is to acquire a thick knowledge of a specific case (Stake in Denzin and Lincoln 2000:437). This study of the particular nature, complexities and interpretations of a single case is not concerned with generalisations and abstractions; it instead aims to develop a deep understanding of a specific case. This type of study attracts much criticism from academic researchers who consider the attempt to uncover particulars competes with the search for general themes and explanations (ibid: 439). They argue that case studies are only useful if they are compared with other case studies to reveal commonalities, which enable the building of theory (ibid: 437-439). However the single case study cannot avoid being comparative, as a specific case cannot be properly understood without a good knowledge of and constant reference to other cases. Even when findings appear to be unique they reveal unusual but

recognisable and generalisable behaviour, themes and circumstances, which are of use in developing theory (ibid 442).

The primary data used in this study was gathered in the field in Kuching and The Kelabit Highlands, Sarawak, Malaysia, during the Months of September and October 2004. This material consists of 18 semi-structured interviews and more than 30 off the record conversations with members of the Kelabit community, as well as non-Kelabits with an extensive knowledge of tourism in Sarawak, and tourists in the Kelabit Highlands.

My initial strategy for building a pool of informants in the field was snowballing. In order to overcome any problems of representation, which may be associated with snowballing, and therefore impact negatively upon the validity of my empirical material, I purposely selected potential informants with the aim of uncovering as broad range of perspectives, concerning ecotourism in The Kelabit Highlands, as possible. With this in mind, I paid particular attention to ensuring diversity in gender, age and level of involvement in tourism when selecting potential informants.

### ***Limitations***

A lack of modern communication technology combined with long distances between villages limited the number of interviews I was able to carry out while in the field. Tracking down a person whom I wished to interview was very much a hit and miss affair. Prearranging a time and place to conduct an interview was made difficult due to the fact that telephone connections between villages in The Kelabit Highlands are non-existent. However, this did allow me to conduct many off the record conversations, as I was invariably approached by residents of these villages eager to have their say, and often accompanied by one or more persons while walking between villages.

Language did not prove to be a difficulty, as many residents of The Kelabit Highlands speak English. I was forced to employ the services of a translator in only one of the 18 formal interviews that I carried out.

## **Sustainable Development**

The urgent need to identify and implement an environmentally sustainable method of human development has received global recognition and approval in recent years (Haque 2002:441). The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio forced the realisation that the earth's resources were being used at a far greater rate than they could recover. As a result of this realisation, sustainable development has assumed a central role in development theory, planning and implementation. The generally accepted definition of sustainable development is that of The Brundtland Commission Report, which described sustainable development as "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (National Centre for Sustainability).

Discussions on sustainable development have usually emphasised the fundamental importance of economic growth and the environment in any strategy that aims to promote this concept as a central component. This perspective supports improving human living conditions through economic growth that promotes the protection and preservation of natural resources and ecosystems upon which both the present and future generations rely (The Global Development Research Center, 2005). This definition of sustainable development stresses that the objectives of economic growth and environmental conservation can compliment and even reinforce each other. Long-term, effective growth is reliant on the environment for natural resources, a healthy and productive work force, as well as its ability to absorb and dissipate waste. The environment can in turn benefit from economic growth, as rapid economic growth is the key to poverty reduction, and poverty is a major cause of environmental degradation (Rigg 1997:80, Sterner and Segnestam 2001:7-14). When people are removed from the insecurity of poverty they gain the freedom and opportunity to think in a more long-term perspective as to how they can best utilise their surrounding environment. If people are freed from the struggle of day-to-day survival they are no longer forced to exploit the environment, upon which they depend for their livelihood, in ways that destroy its long-term productivity (Sterner 2003:23). In order for economic growth and poverty reduction to be sustainable they must be promoted within an ecological framework that protects or even enhances the natural environment (Sterner and Segnestam 2001:4). Therefore, in any vision of true sustainable development; growth, environmental protection and poverty reduction must go hand in hand. It then appears to be ineffective to consider the sustainable use and preservation of natural resources and ecosystems without recognising the inherent link between humans and the

natural environment.

### ***Pro-poor Growth***

Pro-poor growth is a concept that recognises the importance of social as well as environmental issues in assessing approaches to sustainable development. “Pro-poor growth can be broadly defined as growth that enables the poor to actively participate in and significantly benefit from economic activity” (Pro-Poor Tourism 2004). Pro-poor growth emphasises that human development and the environment are mutually dependent, and in particular that poverty and inequality are important impediments to sustainable development. Poverty alleviation is one of the most publicised and pressing UN Millennium Development Goals and is considered by the World Tourism Organisation (2004), to be ... “an essential condition for peace, environmental conservation and sustainable development”....Pro-poor growth is compatible with the growth orientated sustainable development paradigm, discussed above, as it does not question the desirability of economic growth but the structure and composition of that growth.

### ***Sustainable Tourism***

The global economic importance and potential for growth of the tourism industry make it especially relevant and applicable to sustainable development (Fennell 1999:13-14). The potential for the creation of a sustainable tourism industry must then lie within the basic principles of sustainable development. All stakeholders in the tourism industry will be required to embrace strategies which ensure the long-term survival and improvement of their industry, and not those, that instead, aim to maximise short-term economic gains. Sustainable approaches to tourism development should aspire to balance the present and future needs of national, regional and local authorities, the private sector, host communities and tourists. In order for a tourism project to be sustainable, it should be financially viable, ecologically sensitive and benefit the local community, both financially and socially. These factors are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Ultimately they have the potential to enhance the tourist experience by preserving and even improving the core assets upon which the tourism industry is based; the natural environment and local culture.



## **Ecotourism**

Ecotourism appears to be an ideally placed sector of the tourism industry to successfully implement and benefit from the strategies and objectives of sustainable tourism. This form of tourism has been promoted as compatible with both long-term economic development and conservation needs. The World Tourism Organisation (2002) considers that ...“ecotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism, concerning the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism”.

The importance and tremendous economic potential of ecotourism is evident in the fact that it is considered to be the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry, which is estimated to be the world's largest industry (Fennel 1999:162-163). It is, however, difficult to accurately assess the importance of ecotourism to the global and local economies, due to the lack of a clear definition of this concept, and therefore, exactly what percentage of the tourism industry ecotourism encompasses.

The oldest and largest ecotourism organisation, the US based NGO, The International Ecotourism Society (2003, 2004) defines the term as, “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”. Fennell (1999:43) having reviewed a large number of definitions provides a more comprehensive definition:

*Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resourced-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally orientated (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.*

Although local communities are included in the above definitions, they emphasise that ecotourism is nature based. The authors appear to view host societies as an unimportant or secondary part of the ecotourism experience or product. Other researchers on the subject consider both nature and culture as integral components of ecotourism. McLaren (1998:97) considers that few travellers actually travel just to view nature, but also want to observe and experience cultures unlike their own. Another example of this more inclusive definition is that of the Centre for Ecotourism (Global Development Research Centre 2005), which defines ecotourism as follows:

*It is an enlightening, participatory travel experience to environments, both natural and cultural, that ensures the sustainable use, at an appropriate level, of environmental resources and, whilst providing viable economic opportunities for the tourism industry and host communities, makes use of these resources through conservation beneficial to all tourism role players.*

Most definitions are proactive. They recognise that it is impossible for ecotourism not to impact upon local environments and host society, but stress that these impacts should be positive. This emphasis on the preservation or even enhancement of environmental resources and local community empowerment at ecotourism destinations appear to be the central principles that set ecotourism apart from other related activities such as; nature, wildlife or adventure tourism.

In this context, ecotourism can be viewed as a practical means of making the preservation of valuable ecosystems and cultures economically viable or even advantageous to local communities as well as regional and national governments. However, this ideal of ecotourism is often far from the reality of its application and objectives. Ecotourism is often perceived as no more beneficial to the environment or local communities than any other form of tourism. New slogans such as eco, ethno, cultural and green-tourism have been co-opted by states and economic elites to overcome local opposition and promote their own interests (Parnwell in Bryant and Parnwell 1996:11-13). This type of criticism may be rooted in the perception that certain interest groups use ecotourism solely as a marketing tool to attract conservation minded customers and open up new areas for tourism development, while ignoring its principles of conservation and community development. Cater (in Cater and Lowman 1994:4) views this process as an example of ...“environmental opportunism” in which the travel industry is simply ... “relabelling the status quo”. Similarly, Honey (1999:51) considers “Much of what is marketed as ecotourism is simply conventional mass tourism wrapped in a thin veneer of green”.

The lack of consensus regarding what ecotourism is or represents, reflects the diversity of stakeholders and interest groups involved in the ecotourism industry. It often depends on who is utilising the concept and their objectives (Fennell 1999: 43). There appears to be an urgent need for researchers, together with the tourism industry, to identify the key features and

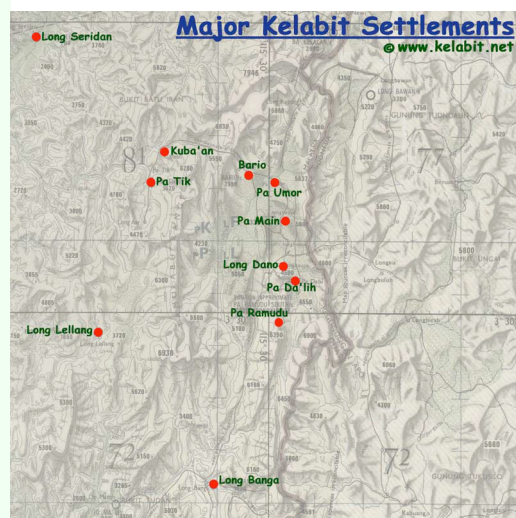
guiding principles of ecotourism that will ensure it is based on sustainable practises. This could create measurable, and therefore, enforceable guidelines for ecotourism projects and greatly reduce the scope for personal interpretation and manipulation.

For the purposes of this study, ecotourism as a concept includes both natural and cultural attractions, as well as a desire on the part of tourists, to discover and learn from the experience, as these are the primary attractions of the Kelabit Highlands to tourists. It also includes a genuine effort on the part of both tourists and tourism providers to minimise any negative effects of tourism upon the natural environment and local people.

## The Kelabit Highlands



Courtesy of [www.kelabit.net](http://www.kelabit.net)



Courtesy of [www.kelabit.net](http://www.kelabit.net)

The Kelabit Highlands are situated in the northeast corner of the Malaysian State of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. These highlands are a large plateau, which lies at an altitude of over 1100 metres above sea level and is surrounded by jungle-clad mountains, including Gunung Murud, the highest peak in Sarawak at an altitude of 2650 metres (Malaysian Nature Society 1998).

This area is the homeland of the Kelabits, which belong to the *Orang Ulu*. The term *Orang Ulu* is from the Malay language and means “people of the upriver”. The *Orang Ulu* then are the indigenous groups who inhabit the interior areas of Sarawak (Seling and Langub 1989:9). With a total population around just 6,000 the Kelabits are one of the smallest tribal groups in Sarawak. Less than one third these 6,000 Kelabits live in the Highlands. The rest have moved to the towns and cities of Sarawak and beyond to take advantage of the education and employment opportunities to be found in these urban centres (The Kelabit Net 2003). Of the approximately 2000 permanent inhabitants of the Kelabit Highlands around half live in the town of Bario. There are no roads or navigable rivers linking Bario to communities outside the Kelabit Highlands. However, Bario is serviced by daily Malaysian Air System (MAS) flights from Miri and Marudi, and is the administrative and commercial centre of the Kelabit Highlands.

The economy of the Kelabit Highlands is based on farming, and in particular the practise of wet rice cultivation. The region is well known for producing ‘Bario Rice’. This rice variety is renowned throughout Asia for its distinctive flavour, aroma and texture. Although it is now grown outside the Kelabit Highlands, the particular conditions of this region ensure the locally grown rice is still the most sought after. Growing fruit crops, particularly bananas and pineapples, and the rearing of water buffalo, are also important farming activities. Other important contributors to the local economy include, tourism, the collection of jungle produce, especially timber, firewood and wild game and remittances from relatives living outside the Highlands.

The Kelabit Highlands is becoming an increasingly popular tourist destination. Tourist numbers have increased steadily since an all-weather runway replaced the grass airfield in 1998. This resulted in a much more reliable air service for Bario, especially during the wet season. Tourist numbers have increased from approximately 350 in 1997 to approximately 1000 in 2003<sup>1</sup>. The main attractions of this area to tourists are its combination of large areas of undisturbed primary rainforest, the existence of a unique and colourful culture, and a sense of adventure and discovery as a result of the geographic isolation of the area.

Most tourists who travel to Bario take the opportunity to trek in the highland jungle. Treks can

---

<sup>1</sup> There are no official records concerning the number of tourist arrivals in Bario. These figures were compiled as a result of examining the guest books of all accommodation providers in and around Bario and then discussing these figures with lodge managers and Malaysian Airline System (MAS) staff.

vary from a few hours to 12 days. Trekkers are able to experience the rich and often unique flora and fauna of the Kelabit Highlands. The mixed dipterocarp forests of the hills and the kerangas or peat forests on the plateau are home to a wide variety of plant life including pitcher and rhododendron plants, fungi which glow in the dark, 42 known varieties of wild orchids, and rafflesia, which is the world's largest flower. Animal life includes bearded pigs, gibbons, the Malayan bear, barking and sambar deer, the clouded leopard, orangutan, black eagles and hornbills. This was also the area of the last known sighting of the highly endangered Sumatran rhinoceros in 1986 (Malaysian Nature Society 1998).

The culture of the Kelabit people is also a major attraction to tourists. Many tourists come to this region expecting to discover a traditional culture unaffected by the forces of modernisation. These tourists are often initially disappointed to find a culture that has embraced progress and adapted to the demands as well as accepted the opportunities of modernisation. The Kelabits converted to Christianity in the late 1940s and immediately abandoned many of their practises and beliefs that were not compatible with this faith (Saging and Bulan 1989:90). Only the oldest Kelabits still have the intricate Kelabit tattoos and elongated earlobes weighed down with heavy brass ear rings. Western style clothing is the norm and English and Malay are widely spoken. Many Kelabits still live in long houses but these are built using modern materials such as concrete, plywood, glass windows, steel roofing, linoleum and all weather paint to protect the timber. However, this initial disappointment on the part of many tourists to the region is soon superseded by a fascination and respect for the Kelabit culture, as it exists in the present. Despite the process of modernisation, the Kelabit people have retained an amazing capacity for warmth and generosity towards friends and strangers alike. The special relationship the local people have with the jungle, as well as their deep knowledge of its workings and seemingly endless uses for its products, are another component of Kelabit culture which many tourists find fascinating. Finally, although the structure of long houses is not what many expect, the concept of communal living and a sense of egalitarianism remain very real, this too is extremely interesting and appealing to tourists.

# Who Benefits Economically from Tourism in the Kelabit Highlands?

## ***Pro-Poor Tourism***

Many scholars consider a tourism industry with a pro-poor focus as an essential component in the success or sustainability of any community based tourism project (Cater 2001, Din 1998 *et al*). “Pro-poor tourism is tourism that results in increased net benefits for poor people” (Pro-Poor Tourism: Sheet No.1 2004). Therefore for tourism to be pro-poor it must make certain the benefits to the poor are greater than the costs (ODI 2001). Pro-poor tourism can ensure this happens by creating and expanding practical opportunities for the poor to become involved in and benefit from the industry. Pro-poor tourism then aims to address the very important question, “Who should tourism be sustainable for?” (Din 1998:3). However, in the discussion and practise of sustainable tourism, the tourism industry has usually emphasised environmental sustainability (ODI 2001). Pro-poor tourism however, aims to place the needs and priorities of the poor at the heart of the debate. In this way it aims to have a positive effect on the lives and particularly livelihoods of the poorest members of society. This concept is particularly important in more remote destinations, as community-based tourism projects are reliant on the acceptance of tourism as something beneficial by members of local communities for their long-term survival (Din in King 1992: 125). According to Din (1998:8) current evidence does not support the idea that substantial investment in tourism developments in peripheral areas will create an automatic trickle down effect and thereby benefit the local economy. He considers this type of approach may lead to an accumulation of local resentment towards tourists, as they find themselves excluded from the opportunities created by the industry and forced to deal with the negative consequences, such as a loss of control of community resources (Din in King 1992:120-125). Friendliness and hospitality towards tourists are very important tourism assets and therefore vital in sustaining a viable community-based tourism industry.

## ***The Structure of the Tourism Industry in the Kelabit Highlands***

### **Accommodation Providers**

The arrival of tourists to the Kelabit Highlands creates demand for the goods and services that they consider necessary and desirable for a fulfilling holiday experience. The vast majority of income derived from tourist arrivals in the Kelabit Highlands is concentrated within two areas of the industry; accommodation providers and guides. These are the core and most essential products demanded by tourists to the area. Economic returns from accommodation tend to accrue within members of the existing Kelabit economic elite. The accommodation sector is dominated by this elite, as they have the necessary access to the financial capital and the skills required to successfully set up and manage such a business. Financial capital is especially important in the construction of lodges, as these are all large and comfortable with modern amenities. Most lodge owners have made their money working in highly skilled and well-paid jobs outside of the Kelabit Highlands. They have invested capital in the setting up of these businesses and either returned to the area or utilised well-educated family members to manage operations. Longhouse accommodation is dominated by families with entrepreneurial and English language skills, as well as a knowledge and appreciation of tourists' desires and expectations. Most longhouse inhabitants do not want tourists to stay overnight with their family, as they perceive tourists would consider the facilities too basic and uncomfortable and the food too strange or simple. They also feel tourists would be disappointed with their inability to converse in English.

Accommodation in and around Bario tends to be on an all-inclusive basis. Tourists are charged RM 50-60 (10.80-13.00 EUR) per night; this price includes all meals, unlimited coffee, tea and snacks. Most tourists find accommodation in one or more of the five lodges in the vicinity of Bario. Labang Lodge and Bariew Lodge are located in Bario, de Plateau Lodge around 20 minutes walk from Bario on the road to Pa Ukat, Gems Lodge is located at Pa Umur, one hour from Bario and Batu Ritung Lodge, four hours from Bario at Pa Lungan. The other main accommodation options are at Bario Asal Longhouse and the longhouse in Pa Dalih, a popular overnight stay for trekkers on the Bario Loop. There are few direct employment opportunities created by the accommodation sector, as all are family run ventures. In the longhouse at Pa Dalih and Bario Asal tourist accommodation services are monopolised by single families and income derived from overnight guests tends to stay within

these families and is not shared among longhouse residents. The two lodges, which find it necessary to use non-family staff, both employ Indonesian workers, as locals are not interested in the low wages offered by lodges. Women are represented in the accommodation sector, but tend to play less visible roles than men. It is men who perform such tasks as meeting tourists at the airport and transporting them around the vicinity of Bario, whereas women take care of visitors while they are at the lodge. Four of the five lodges are family run concerns, in which husband and wife share both responsibility for operating the business as well as economic returns.

## **Guides**

Tourists have no choice but to employ the services of a local guide if they are to embark on any but the shortest and simplest walks in the area. The jungle is thick and has very few distinguishing features to the untrained eye. There exists an extensive network of tracks that regularly dissect each other and branch off in many directions. Distances are often great and most of the tracks are in poor condition. It is therefore dangerous and unrealistic for tourists to expect to trek in the jungle without the assistance of a guide. Guiding fees range from RM65-85 (14.00-18.40 EUR) per day. Most treks are arranged at the lodges. Therefore, guides are reliant on the lodge managers for most of their customers. Each guide tends to work exclusively or semi-exclusively with a particular lodge. This is a mutually beneficial relationship that ensures guides receive regular work and lodges can depend on the services of reliable and skilled guides. Lodges receive no fee or commission from either trekkers or guides.

Guiding is considered a well-paid and high-status occupation within the community. All full-time guides have gained many of the skills they require to become competent and confident guides by leaving the Kelabit Highlands in order to study and work. This exposure to the “outside world” has enabled them to understand, be at ease and deal with people from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, opportunities to gain employment as a guide currently appear to be restricted to a select few who have returned to the area to take advantage of the growing number of tourists and inexpensive lifestyle of the Kelabit Highlands, having already acquired most of the skills this occupation demands.

Guiding is a predominantly male occupation. However, one of the five permanent guides is a



woman; all the part time guides are men. The single female guide is highly respected by her peers and greatly sought after by tour companies and researchers wishing to operate and work in the Highlands, and is therefore able to charge a higher fee than other guides in the area. This guide's reputation has been gained as a result of her wide experience in the tourism industry of Sarawak, in addition to her vast experience in guiding independently as well as for a travel company, which has been instrumental in the promotion of sustainable tourism in Sarawak. She also possesses an extensive contact network within The Kelabit Highlands and the neighbouring Kayan Mentarang National Park in East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Furthermore, she has an excellent knowledge of the local culture and jungle and has participated in a number of academic studies in the Kelabit Highlands

Porters are employed if a trekking party is too large to be managed by a single guide. Porters carry extra luggage and food and assist the guide in managing the trekking party and ensuring the safety of trekkers. Porter fees are RM65 (14.00 EUR) per day. This activity allows some members of the community, who do not have the relevant skills to be guides, to receive an income from trekking. This also serves as ideal training for those who wish to become guides. Most porters already possess a deep knowledge of the jungle and are highly skilled in jungle survival, but lack experience in dealing with tourists. They are given the opportunity to interact with tourists, develop necessary language skills and gain an understanding of tourists' expectations as well as limitations. However, demand for porters is not great, as the Kelabit Highlands mainly attracts independent travellers; therefore trekking parties tend to be small in number.

## **Involvement of Villagers**

There are few opportunities for villagers to obtain indirect income from tourism. What little income is earned is the result of selling food to the lodges; particularly jungle produce such as wild meat and vegetables. This income is irregular and not considered particularly significant by villagers. There is, however, an effort to get more members of the local communities involved in the tourist industry. A Kelabit academic who works with development issues, has identified the fact that many goods required by lodges to satisfy customer needs are not available in Bario, and therefore, must be flown in from the nearby population centres of Miri or Marudi. Many of these goods could potentially be produced in the Kelabit Highlands. Uncultivated land could be used to rear pigs and chickens, as well as grow seasonal fruits and

vegetables favoured by tourists, but which are in short supply in Bario. Lodge owners in particular would be required to inform farmers which products and the amounts of these products they regularly use. Locally grown agricultural produce would be fresh, easily obtainable at short notice and, most importantly, would avoid the considerable freight cost from Miri or Marudi<sup>2</sup>.

There does then exist the opportunity for more people to gain an income from tourism. This income, however, should compliment and not substitute core economic activities such as rice farming or guiding. This will greatly reduce the level of leakages from the local economy, which will result in a cumulative economic impact within the community that is larger than the original sum of tourist expenditure. This is an important concept in sustainable tourism, as those areas that can minimise economic leakages and maintain a tourism industry based primarily on local resources, and therefore retain more tourist expenditure within the local economy, should be more economically viable and able to spread the benefits of tourism more evenly among the community than areas which rely on resources from outside to sustain a tourism industry (Fennell 1999:163-164).

## **Involvement of Local Businesses**

Of the seven combined café-grocery stores in Bario, none considered tourist expenditure as a significant income. Tourists do occasionally purchase items such as telephone cards, cigarettes, soft drinks and beer, however all these shops considered this revenue as secondary to that they receive from members of the local community. The relatively small economic benefit shop owners gain from tourism, when compared to lodge owners and guides, is due largely to the all-inclusive nature of accommodation in the area, as well as the fact that many tourists come prepared, as they are unsure of what to expect when they arrive in Bario. One retailer that does obtain a significant income from tourism is the craft shop in Bario.

Approximately 50% of the total income of this business is derived from tourists. Small items of jewellery, such as bead necklaces and bracelets are the most popular items purchased by tourists. The craft shop in Bario is owned and operated by a woman. There are plans to expand the handicraft industry, particularly by offering tourists a greater variety of products and through direct marketing via the internet. However, one of the factors limiting the development of this industry is a lack of enthusiasm from members of the local community to

---

<sup>2</sup> See Policy Suggestions.

become involved. Repeated efforts to get more local women involved in the production of handicrafts for tourist consumption have so far been unsuccessful. The reason for this appears to be that it takes time and patience to acquire the necessary skills to manufacture handicrafts, and once these skills have been mastered it is still a laborious task. This is particularly true of beadwork, which is the most popular handicraft form with tourists. Furthermore many of the younger Kelabit women consider handicrafts as somewhat old-fashioned and the realm of the older women in their villages.

The evidence presented above, suggests that tourism in the Kelabit Highlands is not pro-poor in structure. Despite the fact that the culture and lifestyle of villagers, and in particular longhouse inhabitants, provides one of the most important products for the existence of a financially viable tourist industry, these people receive only a small share of the income that tourism generates. They tend to go about their daily life unconcerned by the occasional presence of tourists in their vicinity. Villagers have little contact with tourists, so there exist few opportunities for them to gain money directly from tourists, except for the occasional tourist who specifically requests an overnight stay in a longhouse, or if a lodge is full and a longhouse is used to accommodate excess tourists. A lack of financial capital is not the only barrier the poorest inhabitants of the Kelabit Highlands face in being able to participate in the local tourism industry, they are also inhibited by a lack of necessary skills and knowledge. Especially important are communication skills and a proper understanding of tourists' requirements and desires.

## **Logging**

### ***Possible Impacts of Logging on the Kelabit Highlands and ecotourism***

The logging of the forests of the Kelabit Highlands is the single largest threat to the future of ecotourism in the region. The survival of the ecotourism industry appears unlikely if the main attractions; the jungle and a culture that relies on the jungle for its existence and much of its

appeal to tourists, are irreversibly damaged or destroyed. There exists a collective feeling of sadness and frustration among Kelabits at the prospect of the disappearance of their communal forests in the near future. The sadness originates from the feeling that not just the local tourism industry, but the entire Kelabit way of life is at risk from the logging operations in the area. Along with tourism, their greatest concerns appear to be the future of rice growing in the area and the loss of forest products. Rice growing may be at risk due to the possible pollution and sedimentation of waterways as a result of logging activities. This is particularly important, as rice growing around Bario is reliant on large amounts of fresh and clear stream fed water. Products obtained from the forest play a vital role in the everyday life of the Kelabits. Wild plants, animals and fish are part of almost every meal. Wild plants are also valued for their medicinal properties, are the main source of heating and cooking fuel and are widely used in the manufacturing of crafts, the construction of houses, shelters, tools, boats and furniture. There exists a sense of frustration, as Kelabits feel unconsulted, uninformed and powerless to halt a process that is going to have major negative impacts upon their community. In particular they consider that ministers in The Sarawak State Government have not taken their concerns seriously and are ignoring their plight in favour of personal political and economic gain.

Many of the concerns of the residents of Bario are echoed by researchers and the media. Aicken and Leigh (1992:138-144) and Forests Monitor (2004) consider that political authority and family connections largely decide the granting of logging concessions in Sarawak. The main beneficiaries are the ruling and economic elite, while the communities whose land is affected gain little or nothing, yet frequently have to tolerate the destructive social and environmental costs of these actions (Aicken and Leigh: 124, Forests.org 1995). These negative consequences include; soil loss, erosion and compaction, low levels of soil fertility, increased pollution and silting of rivers, water pollution from sawdust and diesel, extensive damage to remaining trees and loss of large trees for local use, dwindling populations of certain animal species due to habitat loss, depletion of non-timber forest products, declining fish and wild game stocks and wild plants used for food and medicine (Forests.org, TED Case Studies 1999). Residents of Bario who have visited areas of the Kelabit Highlands, such as Long Peluan, which have already experienced extensive logging, confirm many of these deductions. Reports that villages whose communal forests have been logged are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a viable existence due to many of the environmental consequences listed above, combined with accounts of changing behavioural attitudes of

Kelabit youth in these villages has caused much consternation in Bario. Further reports that a majority of village residents were not consulted regarding the logging of their communal forests, and were even unaware a contract had been signed until logging operations began, has added to this sense of unease.

## **Tourism and Logging**

Residents of the Kelabit Highlands then, recognise that deforestation is not only the cause of serious environmental problems, but is accompanied by severe social consequences for those people who are forced to adapt to living in a radically changed and depleted environment. A number of residents of Bario, who have worked with conservation and community development issues, feel it is imperative that the local community work together with logging concession holders and relevant government authorities to develop strategies, to ensure that land that has been logged becomes a productive resource again as soon as possible. They envisage such forward planning could minimise the negative social consequences, should their communal forests be destroyed. One such scheme was suggested by The Minister of Tourism, Dato Sri Abang Haji Abdul Rahman Zohari Tun Openg, in 2002. He unveiled a plan to transform Bario into a centre for agrotourism. The proposal aimed to achieve this by complementing Bario's vast areas of irrigated rice fields with the planting of temperate fruits, vegetables and flowers (Sarawak Tourism Board 2002).

Another option would be the domestication of certain valuable and widely used natural forest products that will be lost if surrounding forests are destroyed. Rattan is one such product that has already proved to have potential as a domesticated forest product as well as commercial potential in the neighbouring Indonesian province of Kalimantan, where it has developed into an economically significant and flourishing industry due to the ever increasing global demand for rattan products (NTFP.org 2002). The domestication of plants such as rattan could also contribute to the Sarawak State Government's plan to promote Bario as an agrotourism site and play a significant role in sustaining a viable tourism industry and indigenous community in the Kelabit Highlands. An agrotourism product would attract a different type of tourist to the area than the ecotourists, who are attracted presently by the rainforest and the local people's interaction with it. Agrotourism may appeal to Malaysian tourists, which will be especially significant to the local tourism industry if the proposed road linking Bario to the rest of East Malaysia is in fact constructed. Logging of the Kelabit forests and the possibility

of the highway may render continued ecotourism operations in the area unfeasible. If this becomes the case agrotourism is an option worth examining. It appears particularly favourable when one considers that revenue from tourism can be combined with that gained from the growing of commercial crops.

However, many in the Bario community prefer to examine options that may save their forests. Ecotourism is widely considered the most likely means to convince The Sarawak State Government to halt the continuation of logging in some areas of the Kelabit Highlands that are regularly used by, and therefore, a valuable asset to the local tourism industry. In this way the residents of the Kelabit Highlands hope that the State authorities will come to view the development of ecotourism as a more environmentally effective and economically sustainable use of resources than logging. They hope in particular that ecotourism will be a catalyst in the establishment and gazettement of the Pulong Tao National Park in order to protect the biodiversity of the region and hence the attractiveness of the area to tourists.

Both the Federal and Sarawak State Government appear to take the development of ecotourism in the State very seriously. They consider it a commercially important industry and a valuable means of conserving natural, cultural and local community assets. The Eighth Malaysia Plan includes a complete chapter on tourism. Tourism is identified as a key force in driving economic growth. The development and promotion of nature based tourism, including ecotourism is recommended. The aim is for Malaysia to become a prime ecotourism destination and thereby utilise the nation's strengths as a tourist destination; its amazing natural and cultural heritage (Economic Planning Unit). Speaking at The Third Asia-Pacific Ecotourism Conference (Apeco), The Chief Minister of Sarawak, Pehin Sri Dr. Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud, emphasised that ecotourism was an important component in Sarawak's sustainable forestry policy. He stated, "The State Government will ensure a perpetual green environment so that the local inhabitants remain happy and the tourists are happy to stay here as well" (Sarawak Tribune).

Despite government support for ecotourism, and in particular its focus on ensuring the sustainability of the industry, by protecting the natural and cultural attractions upon which it based, the general feeling among those involved in tourism is that the industry in Bario is now at a turning point. They estimate that if current logging practices continue unchecked the sustainability of the ecotourism industry will be severely tested within two- three years.

Therefore, they are reluctant to invest in and further develop tourism, while the threat of logging hangs over the industry and the area in general. Tree felling is already affecting tourism in the Highlands. Guides are unwilling to take tourists on some of the longer treks as logging has already impacted on some of the areas on these routes. This includes one of the most popular and interesting trekking options, the Bario Loop. This is a four-six day trek, which runs from Bario to Pa Dalih via Long Dano and returns to Bario via Ramudu and Pa Berang. Now guides are forced to go to Pa Dalih and then return to Bario on the same track. This is because large areas of the forest have been logged on the return leg of the loop. In fact logging activities have reached Pa Berang, which is just three-four hours walk to the south of Bario Township on the loop track.

Much of the hope for the survival of the tourism industry in the Kelabit Highlands rests on the creation of the Pulong Tau National Park. If gazetted this park would protect 63 700ha of primary jungle to the northwest of Bario, including most of the Tama Abu Mountain Range. Accommodation providers and guides in Bario consider this area is large enough to support a sustainable tourism industry. The proposed park would be easily accessible from Bario and would preserve the idyllic wilderness setting of the town. Two of the Highlands major natural attractions, Gunung Murud and Batu Lawi<sup>3</sup>, are located within the intended borders of the park. Furthermore, this area could become an excellent area to view wildlife, as many wild animals are expected to migrate and seek refuge there as the surrounding jungle is logged. The National Parks and Wildlife Office first proposed the establishment of a National Park in this area in 1984. According to one local official<sup>4</sup> Pulong Tau National Park ...“is in the final stages of being gazetted” (The Star Online). Residents of Bario and surrounding villages are hopeful, but remain far from convinced, that the proposed Pulong Tau National Park will be gazetted in time to save tourism in the region.

It appears that a general attitude shift concerning tourism will be required in the Kelabit Highlands if ecotourism is to become an effective tool in protecting large areas of forest and mitigating the effects of forest loss on the community. At present the vast majority of community members, both those involved and not involved in the tourist industry, would prefer tourism to continue much as it is at present. They would rather tourism remained low impact and on a relatively small scale. However, it seems likely that in order for the State authorities to consider ecotourism as a serious enough development option to stop, or even

---

<sup>3</sup> Baty Lawi is a spectacular 2000m sheer limestone pinnacle.

<sup>4</sup> Simon Sandi, Forest Department Sarawak's (Northern Division) regional parks and wildlife officer.

reduce, the rate of logging in the region, the Kelabit Highlands must attract many more tourists and become a much more important component in Sarawak's tourism industry, alongside other more popular tourist destinations such as Gunung Mulu, Niah and Bako National Parks. A general acceptance of tourism on a much larger scale appears to be likely however, if this can guarantee the future of at least some of the Kelabit communal forests and in particular result in the full gazettement of the Pulong Tau National Park.

## **Isolation**

### ***The Impact of Geographic Isolation upon Ecotourism***

The geographic isolation of the Kelabit Highlands has the effect of both attracting and deterring potential tourists from visiting the region. The attraction appears to lie in an image of adventure and discovery in an untouched and untamed area created by its remote setting. This remoteness can also be a constraint to tourism, as many tourists presume it is time consuming and expensive to reach Bario, and once there, little if any tourist infrastructure exists, especially in comparison to other trekking sites in Sarawak such as Gunung Mulu National Park, when this is not the case. The isolation of the Highlands is a major factor, which has enabled the tourism industry to be controlled and managed by members of the Kelabit community. This sense of isolation appears to have discouraged larger tour operators from setting up business in Bario. Furthermore the number of tourists able to reach Bario is regulated by the number and frequency of flights to the town.

Overall Bario's isolation appears to impact negatively on the number of tourist arrivals in the Kelabit Highlands. Most tourists who select this area as a worthwhile destination, do so as a result of recommendations from friends, family and fellow travellers, or after reading the very positive entries on the Highlands in two guide books popular with backpackers. The assumption of the Kelabit Highlands as difficult to get to and lacking tourist facilities is greatly compounded by a lack of information available to tourists on the area. This dearth of information is most evident at the Visitors Information Centre in Kuching. This centre contains a large amount of informative and well-designed promotional material on destinations in Sarawak, but very little concerning the Kelabit Highlands. This is a particularly important location for tourists in Sarawak due to the extensive information



available and knowledgeable staff. As a consequence many tourists use this resource to plan their holiday in Sarawak. These tourists tend to choose those destinations promoted by the Visitors Centre, such as Gunung Mulu, Niah and Bako National Parks, in which to experience the natural and cultural attractions of Sarawak. Destinations, such as the Kelabit Highlands, struggle to attract similar numbers of tourists as a result of the lack of information available at Visitors Information Centres throughout Sarawak, but particularly the centre in Kuching.

## **e-Bario**

One attempt aimed at minimising the negative effects of geographic isolation and a lack of information upon the tourism industry in the Kelabit Highlands is e-Bario. This is a multi award winning research project<sup>5</sup> implemented and coordinated by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) and funded jointly by Canada's International Research Development Council (IDRC) and the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS) (e-Bario). This is a pilot project that aims to offer opportunities for isolated communities, such as Bario, to utilise information and communication technologies as a tool in sustainable development (ibid). An important component in the implementation of this scheme is the development of a telecentre that would provide the community with convenient and affordable access to the internet. One objective of this project is to utilise the telecentre to enable the local community to manage tourism in order for this industry to realise its potential and develop into a sustainable enterprise (Roger Harris 2002). The telecentre may be especially effective for the tourism industry in terms of e-commerce, particularly online booking and prepayment of accommodation and activities, as well as a marketing tool, making information on the attractions of the Kelabit Highlands easily accessible to a worldwide audience via the internet (ibid).

However, much to the disappointment of many of those involved in local tourism, e-Bario has failed to deliver on its promise of improving and expanding the industry. The reason for this is that community access to the telecentre is sporadic. Of the 27 days I spent in and around Bario, the telecentre was open to the public a total of four days. This is especially disappointing to accommodation providers and guides, who recognise the potential of the internet to increase the number of tourists, but perhaps more importantly, to take advance

---

<sup>5</sup> e-Bario has been awarded the Asia Pacific Council for Trade Facilitation and Electronic Business e Asia Award (2004), the Information Technology Premier Award (Malaysia), the Industry Innovators Award for Systems Development and Applications from the Society of Satellite Professionals International (2002) and was named one of the Top Seven Intelligent Communities by the World Teleport Association (2002).

bookings. This would allow them to know beforehand of tourist arrivals, which would enable them to plan ahead and organise their schedules accordingly. This is particularly useful in the case of large parties, as their sudden arrival can put pressure on the limited tourist infrastructure of the area, particularly in the high season of June, July and August. Instead these operators must rely on friends or relatives in Miri to print important e-mails and send them to Bario, or one of the four satellite telephones in Bario, which are expensive to use, and receiving an incoming call can be difficult and often involve hours of waiting.

The irregular and inadequate opening hours of the telecentre to the public is due to difficulty in recharging the batteries required to power the computers. The telecentre has two power sources, solar panels and a diesel generator. The solar panels are unable to generate sufficient electricity to run the centre, especially during the rainy season, and there exists insufficient funding to purchase diesel fuel for the generator. There does appear to be a lack of will by those involved in the project, both within and outside the local community, to take responsibility in order to secure the necessary funding to ensure the e-Bario project, and the telecentre in particular, fulfil their potential in supporting sustainable community development in the Kelabit Highlands, and in the case of tourism, create a more stable and robust industry as intended in the implementation of the project. However, a solution to this problem may not be far off, as during his visit to Bario in October 2004, Shell Malaysia Chairman, Jon Chadwick, said Shell would supply the telecentre with additional solar panels to the value of RM 3,000 (649.00 EUR). It is hoped the acquisition of these extra solar panels will result in the telecentre having a much more dependable power source, which will allow the public to gain regular access to the Internet<sup>6</sup>.

## **The Road**

However, these issues resulting from the geographic isolation of the Kelabit Highlands may be of little consequence in the near future. This is the likely outcome of a plan by the Federal Government to build a highway, which links Sabah and Sarawak and bypasses Brunei. This road would open up the interior of Sarawak. The proposed route of this road would take it through Bario (Sarawak Tribune). This is a very controversial issue in Bario as it is expected that the construction of a road linking Bario with the outside world will have a number of dramatic and far reaching impacts on the community and in particular the tourism industry.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Policy Suggestions.

One expected benefit is that the construction of a road will result in significantly lower prices of goods that the local community needs to bring in from Miri and Marudi by aircraft. Currently the community is reliant on the scheduled MAS and chartered Hornbill Skyways flights to supply Bario with a wide range of goods, including: vehicles, fuel, building materials and foodstuffs such as eggs, sugar, coffee and tea. Malaysian Airlines charges RM 0.70 (0.15 EUR) and RM 0.50 (0.10 EUR) per kilo for freight from Miri and Marudi respectively. Hornbill Skyways charges RM 5000.00 (1.081.00 EUR) to charter an aircraft from Miri, with a maximum cargo weight of 1400 kg.

Some examples of the difference in the price of goods that are regularly bought into Bario from Miri by aircraft are:

Cement 50kg	Miri RM 16.00 (3.40 EUR)	Bario RM 200.00 (43.20 EUR)
Diesel 1 litre	Miri RM 1.00 (0.20 EUR)	Bario RM 5.00 (1.00 EUR)
Sugar 10 kg	Miri RM 70.00 (15.10 EUR)	Bario RM 200.00 (43.20 EUR)
Eggs 12	Miri RM 6-8.00 (1.30-1.70 EUR)	Bario RM 15.00 (3.20 EUR)

These products, along with a variety of others, are considered essentials by many residents of Bario, and goods accessed from Miri and Marudi are particularly important commodities in the tourism industry. The considerable freight costs must be absorbed by tourism operators or passed on to tourists. The substantial cost of transporting building materials such as cement, glass and roofing iron as well as generators, or solar panels and batteries to Bario limits the opportunities for many Kelabits to become accommodation providers, and is a central factor in the accommodation sector being monopolised by a Kelabit economic elite. These materials are required in the construction of tourist accommodation, as visitors to the area demand a certain level of comfort, which these goods provide. Locally sourced materials, such as timber and bamboo are often used in the construction of lodges to give the building a more traditional or jungle feel, however, these local goods are used in addition to and do not replace the more modern construction materials, which must be flown in. In this way the remoteness of Bario can be seen as impacting negatively upon the tourism product as well as restricting

opportunities for members of the local community to become involved in and benefit from tourism and is therefore, a constraint to the development of a sustainable tourism industry. These goods would be considerably more affordable if a road was built, which would allow them to be transported from Miri or Marudi to Bario in private vehicles or freight trucks. This would also solve the problem of the time it takes to get cargo from the airport in Miri to Bario, which is usually around two weeks and often much longer in the high season, especially for bulky items.

A number of members of the Kelabit community, both resident in, and living outside the Highlands, have identified several possible negative consequences associated with the construction of a road linking Bario to other centres in East Malaysia. Foremost among these, is the fear that the community will have no way of controlling tourism. They expect a big increase in numbers and a change in the type of tourists who visit the Bario area. Most local residents express a desire for tourism to remain much as it is in terms of tourist numbers and the type of tourist that Bario attracts. They feel that tourism does not impact negatively upon themselves or the natural environment. They believe that the building of a road will result in many more day-trippers and short stay visitors. Some of the local population have visions of busloads of tourists stopping in Bario for an afternoon or single night before departing to enjoy the other attractions of Sarawak. They also fear that there will be a marked increase in the number of local Malaysian tourists arriving in private vehicles. This is considered a particular problem as many of these will arrive in the weekend, resulting in Bario and its immediate surroundings being crowded and somewhat chaotic during the weekend. Presently the weekend in this area is set-aside for family and worship. This is important to the Kelabit people and hordes of tourists demanding goods and services, especially on Sundays, would be most unwelcome to many people.

Those involved in the local tourism industry consider that these tourists would demand a different type of experience than that demanded by tourists at present. They feel these new types of tourists would be attracted to the area, not for the pristine jungle and interesting local culture, but instead the cool climate, fresh air and resort facilities. This could bring about the need for the construction of resort complexes complete with bars, restaurants, casinos, swimming pools and golf courses, as has happened in the hill resorts of the Genting and Cameron Highlands in Peninsular Malaysia. Lodge managers and guides whom I discussed this issue with; consider that, unlike most foreign tourists, who relish trekking in the

rainforest, Malaysian tourists who visit the Highlands appear to consider the jungle a hostile and dangerous environment. As a consequence, these local visitors are more likely to stay around Bario and are often disappointed with the lack of alternative recreational opportunities and services available. This perception of local tourists being attracted to the area as an escape from the heat and bustle of cities, rather than by the natural beauty and interesting culture of the area, has created a degree of fear among local residents that the local culture and in particular the jungle will become much less important to the tourism industry, as this new type of tourist will have little interest in the natural history or conservation of the region. This may in turn negate one of the main arguments that may be used to protect, at least certain areas of the forests of the Kelabit Highlands, which is their central importance to developing and maintaining a viable and sustainable ecotourism industry.

The process of catering to the tastes and expectations of more wealthy tourists would require significant outside capital. The fear among Bario residents is that this process would result in an influx of wealthy investors, who will offer local Kelabit landowners enormous sums of money for their land in order to construct personal holiday mansions and develop large-scale resorts to accommodate rich tourists. There is a concern that this situation will result in the large-scale dislocation of the Kelabit from their ancestral land. In turn the Kelabits will lose the ability to control their existence and shape their own destiny and ultimately that this course of tourism development will lead to the total destruction of the Kelabit way of life, as it exists today.

This process may be facilitated by a great deal of confusion over land tenure. In the Kelabit Highlands many inhabitants still believe land, which they have inherited from their ancestors, legally belongs to them and cannot be taken from them by either government or private interests. This is however, not the case, as these native customary land rights have been gradually eroded. The authorities in Sarawak refuse to recognise native customary rights of indigenous communities to their land (cultural survival 1998). This is made possible by the fact that although the law recognises customary land rights it also contains provisions, which allow the relatively simple removal of these rights and dispossession of ancestral lands (The Borneo Project 2005). As a result there exists an urgent need for the Kelabit Community to prove their native customary rights and thereby gain official recognition of the ownership of their communal lands<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Policy Suggestions

The majority of Kelabits with whom I discussed the issue of the construction of a road linking Bario to the outside world recognise the advantages this would provide the community. However, many older residents of the Kelabit Highlands, in particular, are wary, and in some cases, afraid of the changes to their community and lifestyle that will inevitably accompany this project. Business owners in Bario recognise the advantages to the area a road would bring, but appear to consider that Bario is not ready for such a major development and the changes it will entail. They consider there should be serious evaluations as to the likely effects of a road upon the local community. These should be widely discussed and the concerns of the local population addressed, so the opportunities that a road could offer can be maximised and likely negative effects minimised. Chief among these concerns are the changes to tourism that will result from the opening up of the region and in particular the loss of local community capacity to manage and control the industry.

## **Policy Suggestions**

### ***Information***

One important step to overcoming the combined problems of isolation and a lack of information would be for those involved in the local tourism industry to work closer together towards a single goal; the development of tourism in the area. A greater level of cooperation between stakeholders, particularly lodge owners, could greatly enhance the overall tourist product, as well as involve more members of the local communities in the industry. The production of an informative and attractive brochure as well as posters to promote the Kelabit Highlands as a prime ecotourism destination would be an especially effective measure in attracting larger numbers of tourists to the area. This promotional material would be particularly effective if made available to visitors information centres, travel agents as well as hotels and guesthouses throughout Malaysia. The Sarawak Tourism Board has so far not produced any printed material with reference to the Kelabit Highlands but may assist in the production of such material if encouraged by the initiative taken by the Kelabit community. Furthermore written material developed from within the Kelabit community will allow them to decide how they promote themselves and their area, and which market segment they aim for, allowing them to control the type of tourists they attract (Roger Harris 2002).

Currently there is no information available for tourists on arrival at the airport in Bario. A notice board or folder containing a map of the area, accommodation options, and activities, including trekking options and guides, as well as information on protecting the natural environment and how one is expected to act while staying among the Kelabit people would be a useful asset. At present the airport can be rather confusing. Many tourists arrive with little knowledge of the area and what to expect. They are usually met on arrival by a representative from one of the lodges and are generally unable to gain any meaningful advice as to which accommodation options and activities would most likely suit their requirements. Information for tourists at the airport would enhance the overall tourist experience by creating a less confusing and more pleasant first impression of Bario and allow tourists to make informed choices concerning their time in the Highlands upon arrival.

### ***Local Involvement***

A greater level of cooperation between stakeholders could also provide new and interesting activities and products for tourists, while creating new opportunities for locals to become involved in and benefit from tourism. Entertainment and cultural shows could be organised and promoted. Lodge managers could inform their guests of performances and organise transport to the venue in order to maximise the number of tourists in attendance. Lodges could promote the local handicraft industry by displaying and selling handicrafts. Presently tourists are disappointed at the lack of variety and number of handicraft items for sale in the Highlands. This is an underdeveloped industry, which could benefit greatly from a greater level of cooperation between lodges and manufacturers.

In order for farmers to be able to take advantage of the economic opportunities that supplying the lodges with fresh produce would facilitate co-operation between lodge operators and these potential producers is vital. Input from lodge owners and managers would be required to guide farmers in their choice of crops grown and animals reared, based on the long-term food requirements of the lodges. Currently lodge operators complain of a severe lack of locally grown fresh fruit and vegetables, however, air transported chicken, eggs and meat are also ingredients in most meals prepared for tourists. There is available land for the diversification of agricultural produce around Bario, as many family plots previously used for rice cultivation now lie fallow due to the fact that young family members have moved away from Bario and

Indonesian seasonal labour has become too expensive. There does exist then the opportunity for those in the community, such as part-time guides and porters, who receive irregular income from tourism to lease unused plots and thereby gain a greater and more regular income from tourism. This process would also provide the owners of currently non-productive land with an indirect income from tourism in the form of payment for the lease.

### ***e-Bario***

Despite the promised donation from Shell to purchase new solar panels for the telecentre it is unlikely the e-Bario project will succeed in one of its objectives of helping to create a better organised, well marketed and potentially sustainable destination for ecotourists in the Kelabit Highlands, unless the Bario community is willing to take responsibility for the day to day running and maintenance of the telecentre. The initial failure of the telecentre has caused frustration and divisions within the Bario community. These will need to be overcome if e-Bario is to become an effective tool in the development of the local community. In particular those people with the most to gain from the success of this project; tourism providers, need to cooperate in order to ensure the telecentre works for them and their community in the long-term. Currently the community appears to be uncomfortable voicing their concerns regarding the ineffectiveness of the telecentre. There is a need to inform those individuals and organisations that were responsible for its initial funding and implementation, of the status of the project on a regular basis. It is particularly important that these stakeholders are made aware of the current situation as they have the resources and a vested interest, whether that be academic, financial, or one of reputation, in the success of e-Bario. Community effort should also be directed at attracting funding for the project, as was the case with Shell. It may be most effective to target organisations, both public and private, which are likely to benefit from being associated with a groundbreaking, multi-award winning and widely publicised community based, information technology project.

### ***Land Tenure***

There is an urgent need for Kelabits to secure both communal and individual titles to their land. Mapping the boundaries of their ancestral lands in order to keep this territory in the community for the use of the present and future generations is an option. This appears to be a necessary step if some of the Kelabit territory is to be protected from the ever approaching logging operations and developers wishing to take advantage of the growth in the numbers of



tourists that a road linking Bario to the rest of East Malaysia may facilitate. However, this is a difficult option, as the Sarawak State Government passed a law in November 2001, which denied the legal validity of any communal maps unless they had the approval of the Director of the Department of Lands and Survey (Sahabat Alam Malaysia 2001). The Department of Lands and Survey reserved the right to decide who can and cannot become licensed surveyors. This procedure appears to be a reaction by the State authorities to a number of cases in which the Sarawak courts legally recognised community generated maps (ibid). However, there does exist a number of highly respected Kelabit academics, lawyers and government officials who have the ability and opportunity to influence government policy concerning their native customary land rights, as well as the financial resources to employ a government approved licensed surveyor to immediately map the boundaries of their communal lands. This proactive approach to securing state recognised ownership of this most important of community assets would be an extremely positive step in the Kelabit struggle to ensure the Highlands are an attractive place for future generations of Kelabits to live, and absolutely vital in sustaining a viable ecotourism industry in the region.

## **Conclusion**

In this study I have used sustainable development theory to analyse ecotourism in the Kelabit Highlands, in order to determine the degree of sustainability of this industry, in this particular setting. My findings suggest that the logging of the forests of the Kelabit Highlands and the geographic isolation of the region are the two most critical factors in determining whether, or not, the creation of a truly sustainable ecotourism industry can be achieved. Logging in particular, appears to be the most pressing issue, as Kelabits have very little control over this process. Furthermore, the likely impact of logging operations in the region, the destruction of the primary rainforests of the Highlands, has the potential to completely destroy any form of ecotourism in the region. The impact of the geographic isolation of the region upon tourism is both positive and negative, as this factor attracts and deters potential tourists from choosing the Kelabit Highlands as a holiday destination. This impact will be greatly reduced if the proposed highway, which will pass through Bario, is constructed. The resulting lower transportation costs and travelling times will most likely attract a greater number of tourists, with different expectations, than those tourists presently attracted by the primary rainforest, indigenous culture and sense of adventure of the Highlands. This will drastically alter the pattern of tourism and the structure of the tourism industry.

The creation of more opportunities for members of local Kelabit communities to become involved in the ecotourism industry, and in particular, to gain a greater share of the economic benefits that ecotourism generates locally, appears to be a strategy that demands attention if the long-term future of ecotourism is to be secured. The inclusion in the ecotourism industry of a greater number of Kelabits will help to ensure visitors are accepted into the Kelabit community and continue to receive the warmth and generosity afforded to tourists at present. This is especially important, as this attitude of hospitality is one of the Kelabit Highlands most important assets as a tourist destination.

Finally I presented a number of policy suggestions, which may improve the Kelabit Highlands as an ecotourism destination and help to secure the long-term future of tourism in this area. For any of these recommendations to be effectively implemented a much greater level of cooperation between stakeholders in the ecotourism industry of the Kelabit Highlands is essential.

## Bibliography

Aiken Robert. S and Colin . H Leigh, *Vanishing Rain Forests: The Ecological Transition in Malaysia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992

Alvesson, M. and K. Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, London: Sage, 2000

Bryant R.L and M.J. Parnwell (eds), *Environmental Change in South-East Asia: People Politics and Sustainable Development*, London: Routledge, 1996

Cater Erlet and Gwen Lowman (eds), *Ecotourism: A Sustainable Option?* Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 1994

Din Kadir. H, *Entertaining Guests in Remote Areas: Benefits and Problems*, Deptment of Geography Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1989

Din Kadir. H, The Relevance of Tourism to Socio-economic Development in Sarawak, in King Victor. T (ed), *Tourism in Borneo: Papers from the Second Biennial International Conference Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia July, 1992*, Library of Congress, 1992.

Ding Seling and Jayl Langub, “The Orang Ulu: An Overview”, *The Sarawak Museum Journal* No 61 (1989): 19-37.

Fennell, David. A, *Ecotourism: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 1999

Hirsch P and C. Warren, *The Politics of Environment in Southeast Asia: Resources and Resistance*, London: Routledge, 1998

Honey Martha, *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* Washington: Island Press, 1999

McLaren D, *Rethinking Tourism and Ecotravel: The Paving of Paradise and What You Can Do To Stop It*, West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1998

Rigg J, *Southeast Asia: The Human Landscape of Modernisation and Development*, London: Routledge, 1997.

Saging Robert and Lucy Bulan, “Kelabit Ethnography: A Brief Report”, *The Sarawak Museum Journal* No 61 (1989): 89-119.

Yin Robert, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, California: Sage Publications Inc. 1989

Sarawak Tribune, September 30 2004

Stake Robert, in Denzin Norman and Yvonna Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, California: Sage Publications Inc. 2000

Sterner T and M Segnestam, *The Environment and Poverty*. Sida, 2001.

Sterner T, *Growth and the Environment*. Sida, 2003

Birds of Sarawak, [www.arbec.com.my/bos/location.htm](http://www.arbec.com.my/bos/location.htm) visited on 07/12/04

Cultural Survival Quarterly, Malaysia Update: Logging-Post Blockade in Sarawak, Issue 12.3: September 1988, [www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/csq\\_article.cfm](http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/csq_article.cfm) visited on 04/12/04

Cultural Survival Quarterly, Sarawak: The Human Consequences of Logging, Issue 14.4: October 1990, [www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/csq\\_article.cfm](http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/csq/csq_article.cfm) visited on 04/12/04

Economic Planning Unit, [www.epu.jpm.my/new%20folder/RM8/c15\\_cont.pdf](http://www.epu.jpm.my/new%20folder/RM8/c15_cont.pdf) visited on 14/12/04

Forests Monitor, The Untouchables, 2004, [www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Malaysia/RHreport.pdf](http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/Malaysia/RHreport.pdf) visited on 14/12/04

Forests.org, The Global Fight to Save Sarawak Tropical Rain Forests, [www.forests.org/archive/iindomalay/malbasic.htm](http://www.forests.org/archive/iindomalay/malbasic.htm), visited on 11/12/04

Malaysian Nature Society 1998 Expedition to the Proposed Pulong Tau National Park Sarawak Malaysia, [www.geocities.com/rainforest/Andes/2949reportintro.html](http://www.geocities.com/rainforest/Andes/2949reportintro.html) visited on 03/12/04

National Centre for Sustainability, [www.ncsustainability.com.au/?id=faq](http://www.ncsustainability.com.au/?id=faq) visited on 12/03/05

NTFP.org, Rattan Regeneration in Kalimantan and India. Two Approaches: Varied Results, Voices From the Forest No. 5: April 2002, [www.ntfp.org/voices/voices5/article5\\_4.html](http://www.ntfp.org/voices/voices5/article5_4.html) visited on 03/12/04

ODI, Pro-Poor Tourism Report No. 1: Pro-Poor Tourism Strategies: Making Tourism Work for the Poor, 2001, [www.propoortourism.org.uk/ppt\\_report.pdf](http://www.propoortourism.org.uk/ppt_report.pdf) visited on 22/11/04.

PPT, Pro-Poor Tourism Info-Sheets No.3: Tourism and Poverty Reduction-Making the Links, 2004, [www.propoortourism.org.uk/info\\_sheet/3%20info%20sheet.pdf](http://www.propoortourism.org.uk/info_sheet/3%20info%20sheet.pdf) visited on 22/11/04

Roger Harri,s 2002, <http://rogharris.org/E-tourism%proposol.pdf> visited on 14/06/04

Sahabat Alam Malaysia, The Making of Sarawaks New Land Laws: Criminilising Community Mapping and The Gathering of Forest Products, November 2001, [www.surforever.com](http://www.surforever.com) visited on 12/11/04

Sarawak Tourism Board, Bario to be Turned into an Upland Tourist Spot, Hornbill Trail e-Newsletter, 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2002, [www.sarawaktourism.com](http://www.sarawaktourism.com) visited on 21/11/04

The Borneo Project, 2005, [www.earthisland.org/borneo/our\\_work.html](http://www.earthisland.org/borneo/our_work.html) visited on 11/01/05

The Global Development Research Centre, 2005, [www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/eco-tour.html](http://www.gdrc.org/uem/eco-tour/eco-tour.html), visited on 11/03/05

The Global Development Research Centre, 2005, [www.gdrc.org/susdev/definitions.html](http://www.gdrc.org/susdev/definitions.html) visited on 08/05/05

The International Ecotourism Society, 2003, 2004, [www.ecotourism.org/index2.php?what-is-ecotourism](http://www.ecotourism.org/index2.php?what-is-ecotourism), visited on 13/10/04

The Kelabit Net, [www.kelabit.net/kelabits/kelabits.html](http://www.kelabit.net/kelabits/kelabits.html), visited on 01/11/04

The Star Online, soon a national park, October 18<sup>th</sup> 2003, [www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2003/10/18/features/6518571&sec=features](http://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2003/10/18/features/6518571&sec=features) visited on 20/11/04

World Tourism Organisation, 2005, [www.world-tourism.org/facts/menu.html](http://www.world-tourism.org/facts/menu.html) visited on 15/03/05

World Tourism Organisation, 2004, [www.worldtourism.org/frameset/frame\\_sustainable.html](http://www.worldtourism.org/frameset/frame_sustainable.html) visited on 14/03/05

World Tourism Organisation, 2002, [www.world-tourism.org/sustainable/iye/quebec/anglais/index\\_a.html](http://www.world-tourism.org/sustainable/iye/quebec/anglais/index_a.html) visited on 22/07/04

World Travel and Tourism Council, 2005, [www.wttc.org/frameset1.htm](http://www.wttc.org/frameset1.htm) visited on 15/03/05

