

## Making Sense of the Landscape: Eastern Penan Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

This paper explores the ways the Eastern Penan<sup>2</sup> establish their relationship with the landscape, sculpting it in the process, to make a living, and maintain a long-term relationship. As they move across the landscape, they establish a series of campsites (*lamin*) which they leave behind as *la'a* (old campsites) representing their 'footprints' (*uban*). The *la'a* often associated with events, such as deaths, births, even humorous occurrences, become significant *uban* of both the group and individuals linked to these episodes. Movements across the landscape within an area or specific river systems are motivated by the cycle of resource availability. As they harvest resources they establish tenure (*olong*) over them to ensure systematic management and husbandry. Thus, what appears as a natural environment is, in fact, one that has undergone the process of human activities by way of methodological sculpting. As Brosius (1986:174-178; 2001:134-139) noted some years ago, what appears to be an empty space is instead a landscape that encapsulates history and way of life. In numerous conversations with Penan, they often express the view that they are part of the landscape as much as the landscape is part of them; thus what is territory is a space of belonging, our space, *okoo ami'*. Within the context of this human-environment interaction, the relationship of the nineteen Eastern Penan settlements - six nomadic, six semi-settled and seven settled - located in the area between

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<sup>2</sup> The Penan of Sarawak are traditionally a nomadic people. They comprise 16,000 people, inhabiting the most interior of northern Sarawak, in the headwaters of two major rivers, the Rejang and Baram. On the basis of dialect, Rodney Needham (1972) divides the Penan population into Eastern Penan and Western Penan. The Eastern Penan comprise all those Penan living roughly to the east of the Baram River while the Western Penan are located around the watershed of the Rejang River, and along the Silat River in Baram District. There are also some Penan settlements along the Tinjar River in Baram District, along the Jelalong River and coastal area of Bintulu District, and in Suai-Niah area of Miri District. In linguistic terms, these groups appear to be closely related to the Western Penan. There are some minor dialectal differences between the two divisions, but broadly speaking in way of life and socio-economic terms they are similar and consider themselves, and are recognized by others, as one people.