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Earth Island Reports

The Borneo Project

Defending Rivers and the Communities that Rely on Them

Rivers are the lifeblood of Borneo, the third largest island in the world, known for its incredible biodiversity and rich forests. Shared by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam, the island is home to orangutans, sun bears, and many other endangered species. It is also home to thousands of Indigenous people who have hunted, gathered, and farmed there for generations.



photo the Borneo Project

As is true around the world, communities there rely on the rivers for drinking water, fishing, and bathing. Thousands of miles of rivers crisscross the island, serving as traditional highways of the jungle. Because the waterways are so fundamental to all aspects of life, most communities live directly on the banks of the rivers. Now these rivers – and the communities that live on their banks – are being threatened by the development of 12 new hydroelectric dams, scheduled to be completed by 2020.

The people in Borneo's Malaysian Province of Sarawak know how these dams will threaten their way of life. They have taken their lessons from the 2,400 MW Bakun dam on the Balui River that has put 700 square kilometers of virgin rainforest and prime farmland under water. Completed in 2010, the dam displaced about 9,000 residents, mainly from the Kayan and Kenyah Indigenous groups. Those who relocated were forced to pay close to \$15,000 for new homes, despite being subsistence farmers with no previous participation in the cash economy. [Transparency International](#) included the Bakun Dam in its "Monuments of Corruption" Global Corruption Report in 2005.

The next dam on the list, on the Baram River, could potentially be even more destructive. The Baram dam would require the relocation of 20,000 people – almost all from Indigenous groups. More than 400 square

kilometers of land would be flooded, most of which is traditionally (although not legally) owned by Indigenous communities. Much of this land is still richly forested and is a vital habitat for several endangered species. To make matters worse, Sarawak doesn't even need the power that will be generated from these additional dams and no purchasers for the power have been identified yet. In fact, the completed Bakun dam is not even running at full capacity, because there's not enough demand for power.

Now, with the support of [The Borneo Project](#) and other international allies, communities in Borneo are getting organized to oppose the dam proposals. In the case of the Baram dam, the project is partnering with the [SAVE Rivers network](#), based out of Miri, Sarawak. This network of affected communities and nongovernmental organizations came together in October 2011 to share experiences and to make plans for local, regional, and national resistance to the dams. The Borneo Project worked with other US-based NGOs to provide funds for the gathering, which brought together more than 150 representatives from Indigenous communities affected by the planned dams in Sarawak. The Borneo Project is currently fundraising to support the activists who are going village to village and educating riverside communities about the impact of dams.

Supporting communities fighting the dams is at the core of the Borneo Project's mission. For the past 20 years, the Borneo Project – which believes that solutions need to come from within the communities most impacted – has partnered with Indigenous communities resisting environmental destruction in Malaysian Borneo. Science backs the project's approach. In 2009, American political economist Dr. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in economics for her work showing that the best conservation results are found when communities that live on the land are given the rights

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and resources to protect it. These communities have the locally appropriate knowledge to enable them to make the right decisions to conserve their homeland.

Apart from the work on dams, The Borneo Project runs a number of different programs to support Indigenous communities fighting for environmental justice in Borneo. These include running a legal aid fund for those fighting for their land rights; managing three Indigenous-language preschools; publishing traditional stories in Penan, an Indigenous language, and distributing them for free; and working with an international network of activists and NGOs to bring Sarawak's corrupt chief minister, Abdul "Taib" Mahmud, to justice.

Visit: www.borneoproject.org, to learn more about The Borneo Project and to get involved.

—BRIHANNALA MORGAN



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