

Forest Hearts, Forest Stands

Borneo, Malaysia



Letters from Forest Edges

FEBRUARY/MARCH - NUMBER 4

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Dawn

Pinholes of light seep through my blue tarp. It's a yellow-blue light, the color of mangos and pineapple rind. Several raindrops pool above me, then flow through

one of the pinholes. A small drop of water hits my eyelid. I sit up slowly and stretch under my mosquito net. The forest shelter, made of ironwood poles, creaks under my sleeping pad. The light moves down through the canopy gaps, following the river that is the primary entrance to the collective of families of Ba Puak. There are ten forest shelters above the river that divides and fans two small river banks: one for each of the families that live here, and one for guests like me. All of us have a commanding view of the water source.

I lift up my mosquito net and move the kettle from the ashes of the fire to a wooden shelf stacked with split cooking firewood. A boy walks up the riverbank with a small lizard slung around his shoulders. He's smiling. Breakfast has arrived and he greets his sister by handing her the lizard. The girl rolls the lizard across her belly. The children hand it back and forth as they walk up to their shelter and ascend the hardwood ladder. The smile transfers to some of the others up the bank; people are calling out to one another. The smile is transferred even to me as I work at starting the fire, using my parang to split some of the dry wood into smaller pieces.

The wood splinters smoke and sputter; in the forest hut it is still cool and damp from the night before. My pre-caffeinated hands are manipulating the timber with some discomfort. I notice they are still raw from being caught on some spiky rattan the day before.

Inside

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I begin to start a fire and Billy, who has been adopted by this community when his parents began work in a logging camp, brings some flaming sticks over to me. The flame catches and I settle back and wait for the coffee to boil. During the course of the water boiling some of the Penan men join me. They climb up with the kids and soon the place is so crowded that all our legs are all touching. This is a warm, impromptu coffee shop. It is a day that I think everything is right and peaceful in Borneo, in the forest, and within me.

Dati and his monkey arrive from across the stream. I hear him talking softly and quietly to his monkey, “You eat, you eat,” he chants in Penan. “You are happy, happy.”

When I see him he smiles; he points up to the top of his head where his monkey seems to smile between chews of sago shoots. I laugh, the forest platform shakes, the monkey lets out a quiet scream, kids and feet reshuffle. I break out some biscuits to share and our conversation turns to food. We share stories about food; we talk about some of their collection areas and some of the problems they are facing.



Sometimes just getting to the community is hard. A common scene during the wet season.

They tell me about their shortage of rattan and nipa as well and the changing distribution patterns of forest foods. One of the men hands me a hand drawn map: a photocopied sketch labeled with lines of scale, grids, and drawn mostly with a ruler. Ba Puak sits in the middle of the map. They explain that it is wrong; that it is all wrong. They tell me that the mountain ranges are drawn incorrectly. The Penan territory has become someone else’s because of a map. This, it turns out, is a map that the logging company commissioned by someone in a neighboring community. This is a typical maneuver here in Sarawak. Maps often represent an uneasy power. Next, I’m shown some signs that the Penan decided to put up prior to my visit meant to mark their territory in the forest, on the edges of roads, and near the boundaries of their hunting grounds.

Over canned sardines, sago, and some rice I agree to follow them to put up their signs. Some of the people want to show me some of the areas they want to conserve. Others have questions about their forest. To visit the new locations, we will be traveling through locally important hunting grounds, gathering areas, places where people collect medicinal plants, places where stories are shared and information is passed down. It will be a long walk.

Defining Community Forestry

In the North (or in “developing world”), we call this movement community forestry. The *movement* is both figuratively and literal:

it is the effort of communities managing and co-managing forests with other landowners. The landowners can be State, Federal, conservation organizations, timber mining, or national gas companies or private. The basic theory behind this is the people who live both within and along the forest

edges have an intimate understanding of how the forest works. They also understand the dynamics of rural communities, what places need to survive, and how solutions to this survival might be found. While living for four years in Maine and completing my undergraduate research in island forest management, I learned that this involved restoration, community projects, and relying on forest resources less. I observed something similar in Montana's Swan Valley, where the people are experimenting with new logging initiatives and communities practice small-scale, value added logging.

So, this movement means both groups of people sitting down at hardwood tables in forests and discussing options. It means talking and building relationships and, in both the South and the North, dealing with conflict and mediation. It also means research, documenting what exists in forests and the edges that are becoming scarcer and more important. I believe it is at these intersections, where forest meets trail, where culture meets culture, that solutions can be found.



I have come to believe in this movement is by sharing stories around wood stoves, by working with new loggers, by learning how to wield a chainsaw when I had few options of my own, by talking, by going to the bars where people still confront one another about forest management and use. For someone like me, this response yields emotion: it is part of what drives me to write and photograph, seek to learn more. And by sharing with others in forests I hope people will come to believe.

Both here and in Southeast Asia, these places tend to be some of the last intact places, areas where there is

rich traditional knowledge, good hunting, and local culture. Healthy communities are linked to healthy forests. Building on the study of local ecological knowledge (see Conklin 1954, Folke 2004, Brosius 2004) and trends in participatory research (see work by the Ford Foundation and Chambers 1994) partnerships between communities, researchers and others allow for creative models of community forest management in Malaysia.

As Malaysia strives to be fully developed by 2020, there are growing pains. Forests are certainly stretched by development. People living in forests here have a lot to say and contribute. My work involves rigorous methods (interviews, photo elicitation, and sketch mapping). However, some days it is best to just go for a walk. The more I come to work and live here with forest communities, the more I am learning about the importance of non-violent communication, how to be open, and how to listen.

During some of these quiet walks and talks with people in forests, I hear both knowledge and concerns about forest management. I have a hunch that one reason why people are resisting logging is because they have particular visions, knowledge, and dreams for their own forest spaces. Future newsletters will explore forest communities in the context of their values and communication strategies, and the solutions we may arrive at together.

Walking

We ready ourselves. Just the same, I keep a lot of extra room in my pack for forest fruits, rolls of rattan, sago and anything else we might gather. I'm carrying food for seven.

On the edge of the community, a woman is speaking to her daughter. Her sinewy arms are toned from the constant exercise that comes with making a life in the forests in the Upper Baram. She raises her voice and tells the girl, 'Make sure your father brings me back some tasty shoots!'

We laugh, and file down one of the forest pathways and into the river, the highway into the forest pathway and the beginning of our journey. A few minutes later we cross a large river, giggling nervously because the water is almost too high. No one, regardless of culture, wants to get wet in icy cold water. We hold on to on another. Bare and sandaled feet alike slip on stones. Gravel and sand hit legs during our crossing. I flick off my first hitchhiker, a leech that has somehow managed to make the crossing.

Ascending the bank and into the forest is a different world. We enter the primary forest and the land becomes more shadow than light. There

is an understory, and several levels of canopy. Some vines known as epiphytes (plants that grow on other plants) hang from the upper layers of the canopy like yarn a kitten has tangled. There are also epiphytic orchids growing in the crannies of the canopy above, places where organic debris from the canopy has collected. These are plants literally living off nutrients and moisture from the air, creating additional habitat for pollinators. They are symbiotic.

We walk swiftly and quietly along the old narrow footpaths that we share with other mammals of the forest. The floor of the primary rainforest is rarely thick and tangled. The light begins diminishing at least 100 feet above. Measurements show that less than five percent of light from the canopy reaches the primary forest floor. As always when in such a forest, I subconsciously reach for the small flash that helps my camera focus. The area smells like the earth is breathing because it is: everything is either living or decaying. Life, death: inhale, exhale. Although there

are as little as two inches of soil, there are small trees attempting to grow everywhere—especially where the forest canopy above has been disturbed. Most of



Drinking from a Liana Plant, Forest Floor

them won't make it.

The little undergrowth here is damp and holds in moisture like a sponge. I feel it on my pack, which, has taken on a life of it's own. The only comfort in a rotting backpack is that I take a little rainforest with me everywhere I go.

We are in what is called a mixed dipterocarp forest. *Dipterocarp*, means “two-winged seeds” in Latin. When the seeds drop from the canopy they literally twirl from the forest, sometimes with light reflecting off the winged leaves. They fall from the overstory, pass through a emergent layer and land with a sound that is hardly audible.

This is a place where science and a spirit for the land mix. One of the men, Imang, who has been mostly silent until now, points out a forest depression that his people will not travel through or place snares in.

Even the spirits and dreams dictate where people make their living under these trees.

Suddenly, there is a crashing through the canopy. Maga grabs a blowpipe and quickly loads a poison dart into his blowpipe. There is a soft blow in the understory. Billy's eyes tell me dart has struck home. We sit and wait in silence. Ten minutes pass. We creep through the forest cautiously and through the lens of my camera we track the slow creeping of a giant *Varanus* lizard through the canopy. We wait another twenty minutes. The monitor lizard moves from one tree to another. We listen for the sound of a body crashing through the canopy but it never comes. It's explained to me that the lizard might be too big. Or it might not have been an accurate shot. We smile; sometimes forest mammals elude even the best hunters.

Sometime later we emerge on an old forest logging road. It is half forest; half road. We walk like this for hours, the canopy gradually thins, and we make the transition to disturbed secondary forest where the world looks more like the jungle of movie sets: the mark of logging. Here, some of the soil has been completely compacted. In it, nothing grows. We take shelter under on of the only trees for a few minutes.

Back into the primary forest, there is an immediate cooling. Entering this primal habitat is like crossing a border into another world. The thick canopy regulates the temperature. We cut liana vines and drink the water. Incredibly in this hot climate, the juice is actually cool. It is very refreshing. We all trade smiles. There are also some wild ferns to collect and some ginger too. Everyone is happy. A boy just younger than me shinnies up a tree and hangs upside down. I smile at this sense of freedom and lightness. For once, I realize I can feel this way too. I drop my back, place the camera I'm carrying on top and shinny up the tree. We both hang upside

down, suspended between two trees, eyes staring at eyes through the forest. The rainforest, a few meters below, dips and sways. I can hold my balance just long enough before the green landscape tilts and I feel my bare feet swing down, bounce off a tree branch and somehow miraculously find a tree trunk. I slide down the small tree trunk, the tree swinging precariously with me. Everything is good and then the branch snaps. I land on my butt and everyone is laughing, some of them laughing so hard that they have to sit down. I know that this will be one of the stories we will review later, in the evening.

Shortly after, we arrive at the old intersection, where the logging road is making an inroads into toward Ba Puak. We clear some brush and give the sign a fresh



coat of red paint. I take one picture. And then we bend some branches and make an old forest sign, something that only a Penan can read. The message, from the branches is simple:

ALL PEOPLE ARE OF ONE HEART.

Falling

The walk back home is much more painful.

After we finish posting the sign, we walk silently and quickly through the forest. We take a shortcut to a logging road. Here we place a second sign. We are all tired but happy. By late afternoon, there is no more animal life to be seen, no hornbills calling. I look around for secondary forest birds and don't see any. We move into a steady striding rhythm, both sandaled and bare feet marching on hard-packed soil. The men and kids are even smiling, our packs are filled with food, our bellies are filled with sago shoots. I have several extra sago shoots inside my pack. The forest vegetables are light and dense, like the feeling of a full stomach.

At a junction to we place another, final hardwood sign. Hutan Simpanan Penan Ba Puak Di Larang

masuk. "Keep out of this forest area, this is Ba Puak Penan territory," it reads.

The sun is setting against are backs and long shadows of blowpipes, hunting spears, and rattan packs are superimposed against the road. We are walking strong but the open air; there is a glow on our faces and our backs. I watch the shapes we cast on the road surface: a people marching together in time.

From down a bank, through a clearing, we can see a Mitsubishi bulldozer pulling a log out of the forest. We stand and watch as a tree falls. It is a ranga tree, several meters across. Their wood is used for construction, long boats, and timber. My friends and I are witnessing members of a logging company moonlighting after hours. The mood changes; the group tenses as we watch the big dipterocarp arc downward and crash to the ground. When the tree hits, the ground shakes. There is a brief silence.

Maga and Imang look at me and shake their heads. Then they both smile, pick up their hunting spears

and blowpipes once again and we continue walking. Already, they're over it. The sun is at our backs. Their strong footsteps propel their shadows forward, into the future. They are a people whose ideas might survive.



Forest Portraits, Part I



Images (top to bottom): Strangler Fig, Chameleon in canopy, Primary Forest Entrance, Bat Emergence, Upper Elevation Mossy Forest

Hunting Camp Time

To get back to the
forest camp
my camera goes in a dry-bag
the dry-bag goes in a boat to be sent back later
with fish from the fishing net
inside the longboat

and I go in the river
not caring about already wet clothes
floating back
bobbing
past dipterocarp seeds falling
passing banks
and places to find root
and lines of river floods

moving towards camp
I float for minutes
past one river confluence
and then another

these are the places where feet don't touch

four days up river
near the Kalimantan border
where mosquitoes shelter with us
in the waves of rain under shelter tarp
collecting like water in our pots
while *parangs* and smaller jungle knives
divide wild boar
and hands sting from salting fish for days ahead

and the all working and sweating
alongside the forest
with drips of fat from meat exploding
shoot from the fire like fireflies in the night
while frogs in the tributaries answer back

and days pass
two nights turn to six
and my pack molds
while I grow
and learn to distinguish the shadow of orangutan
nests
and the eyes of snakes in the branches
and more colors of brown and green

and not to fear the
leeches that add up

into the mornings that come with the campfire
and the sound of exploding bamboo
to make a black mark that scars a gun
for luck, safety, and accuracy of hunting

I record the taboos of the hunt
collections of
river tortoise and the hornbill
and what they mean
and how to properly throw a fishing net

how to grip rocks with bare feet
and how to walk again

later still
fire ants invade camp
we are jumping and howling in the darkness
the next day, the river rises
deep fast water cools swollen feet
we are humble
quiet
mortal

as we journey from a forest with stories
and visits to sacred
graves and fruit trees and dreams hidden
in between talks about working with the land
and where the young and old men
will eventually settle

and how we will settle

what we need to have with us
the kind of world we will live in
how it is seen from the forest
and from one forest camp to another forest camp
and how different minds and thoughts
need to be understood, learned, reconciled

from the connections of

shadows and corridors of the trees
and points of light
and all the campfires
all the spaces of forest camps

I realize that the forest camp is not a dream
but a future
a real place
of forest time
an earthy knowledge
from all over the world

to be invited to a forest camp is to enter
a world that exists now
as if everything that is hunted
can be found



Food Preservation, Forest Camp

Citations

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Ford Foundation. For Community Forestry projects, see http://www.cnr.berkeley.edu/community_forestry/.



Forest Visions, Forest Edges

Existing Funding Support

My project, *Forest Visions*, is currently supported by a US Fulbright grant. This grant pays for my daily living expenses in the form of a ten-month stipend which I use for my trips to remote forest communities. Travel to the interior of Malaysian Borneo is arduous and expensive. Transport, which involves hiring a 4WD vehicle for a trip into and out of a community often costs over \$300 US. I also pay for guides, relevant supplies that are needed by communities I work with, and food, especially important given food shortages in some of the communities where I work.

What are current donations used for?

My monthly income from my Fulbright is less than my monthly project expenses. I usually make up the difference in my funding shortfall with donations and spending my own money. Donations are especially helpful because they often allow me to travel longer, to more remote forest communities with more supplies that forest people need.

This is also a much more valuable and satisfying way of working.

What are the benefits to donating?

Donations are tax deductible. You will receive an email receipt of your donation, a card by mail, and all project updates. I envision the newsletter I've started here in Borneo as a beginning of a much larger project of working with marginalized forest communities. This is passionate work of a lifetime. Not only am I indebted to you, but you are now part of making my work a reality.

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How to donate?

The easiest way to donate is to send a donation via PayPal, <https://www.paypal.com/>. This is secure, safe and minimizes transaction fees. My email address for donations is: jackson.noah@gmail.com



Donors are invaluable and once my work is finished and mounted, they will be entitled to picking out a complimentary art print as a gesture of my appreciation. My book will also be available as well, at production cost to small donors or free to large donors.



Ba Puak, Forest Signs

Special Thanks to:

Callan Bentley for editing and friendship.

Jessica Lawrence of the Borneo Project (www.borneoproject.org).

Su Mei Toh (www.wildasia.net) and **Nicholas Mujah (SUDIA)** for accompanying me into the field and helping show me the way.

Sze Ning for providing an image of us pulling out the 4WD (see www.szening.com).