

*Social Science Research and Conservation Management in the Interior of Borneo: Unravelling Past and Present Interactions of People and Forests.* Edited by C. Eghenter, B. Sellato, and G. Simon Devung. Bogor, Indonesia: CIFOR, 2001. 297 pp.

What is the role of social science research in conservation projects? How do we better apply research to conservation interventions? Are there trade-offs between social science and interdisciplinary research, on the one hand, and building local interests and skills to conduct research, on the other? If so, what are they and what are their implications? These are some of the key questions this volume addresses at different analytical levels. Based on the grounded experience, documentation and learning involved a long-term applied research project, this volume resists blueprint answers, explores possibilities and constraints, and demonstrates that the answers are anything but straightforward. Moreover, this collection is an important contribution to the ethnographic material of the upland people of Borneo, collectively known as Dayak, as well as a contribution to studies of ethnic minorities and hill tribes generally.

The volume is a small selection of research reports that are the product of the pioneering, ambitious, and long-term (1991–97) interdisciplinary research project Culture & Conservation (C&C), which was part of the larger Kayan Mentarang Conservation Project (KMCP) in the northern interior of East Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo), which is still ongoing. The book is remarkable for the diversity in professional training, research skills, and cultural backgrounds of the authors. The editors all have a deep history with C&C specifically and Borneo generally. Further, ten of the 16 authors are natives of Borneo, with the rest coming from other parts of Indonesia or elsewhere. It follows the tradition established by the Borneo Research Council. The book is also remarkable in that it reflects the methodological and practical experiment that was C&C, namely, to conduct interdisciplinary research regarding the linkages between the environment and the communities directly dependent on those resources that could be useful to a conservation project.

The edited collection consists of 13 chapters — an introductory

chapter that frames and contextualizes the subsequent 12 “research” chapters, which are based on primary fieldwork that was part of C&C. The extensive introductory chapter is divided into two sections: first, an institutional history of C&C, the broader KMCP and the links between them, and then an introduction to the Kayan Mentarang region and its people, particularly the Kenyah, an upland tribe that falls under the rubric of Dayak. The first section of the introduction lays out the logic and history of C&C and recounts the successes, challenges, and lessons learned in light of that logic, namely, connecting social science research and conservation practice in large part through building local interest in research and attendant skills. The second section provides the necessary background to those not familiar with Borneo and its upland people to better understand the 12 fieldwork-based chapters. It focuses primarily on the Dayak Kenyah, who are the primary residents of the Pujungan sub-district, where much of the C&C research took place.

The fieldwork-based chapters themselves “highlight the main attitudes and traditions in forest management among the people living in and around the Kayan Mentarang conservation area”. The chapters are grouped into four themes: the link between traditional knowledge and resource management, traditional institutions related to forest and land tenure, histories and archaeological studies of upland ethnic groups, and documentation of folktales and folksongs. The first set of four chapters by Setyawati, Sindju, Sirait, and Konradus articulates traditional knowledge and resource management through an ethnographic approach to a particular commodity, namely, swidden cultivated rice, uncultivated and cultivated rattan, and the aromatic and elusive eaglewood (*gaharu*), which is the product of a fungal infection of trees belonging to the genera *Aquilaria*. The second set of three chapters by S. Jacobus E. Frans L.; Angguk Lamis, Concordius Kanyan, and Y. Paulus Bunde; and Devung provides ethnographic accounts of traditional Kenyah institutions that regulate property rights over land and forest. This selection of chapters also addresses how these institutions are or are not adapting to socio-cultural change. The third group of two chapters by Anau, Lawai, Arifin; and Sellato traces the

origins and migrations of upland groups in this region through a triangulation of oral history, historical documents, and archaeological artifacts. The last theme covered in the chapters by Ngabut and Lawing documents and analyses the cultural meaning of folktales and folksongs of the Kenyah through an ethnographic approach, with the hope that this will lead to the preservation of these important cultural artifacts.

This volume is unique on several fronts and demands from its readers that they confront some of the most troubling and difficult aspects of reconciling, both conceptually and on-the-ground, conservation and development, global and local concerns about them, and the research-practice continuum. It is the manifestation of the on-the-ground attempt to better link social science research and conservation practice, and in doing so it also draws out some of the uncomfortable moments between them. As with the challenges that other First Nation people and advocates face, some chapters of this book (see the chapters by Ngabut and Lawing) draw attention to tension between, on the one hand, “salvage anthropology” in the hopes of strengthening cultural identity and, on the other, field realities that indicate that some upland people are less concerned about these cultural artifacts than are outsiders. Other chapters provide rich case studies that ask us to think about reconciling research results that do not support the image of the “ecological noble savage” that has become commonplace in the conservation and development practitioner literature (see “The Ecologically Noble Savage” by K. Redford, in *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 15 [1991]: 46–48). For example, the chapters by Konradus and Devung explicitly address the non-compliance with traditional rules and regulations regarding resource use and management in the face of social and cultural change. The book, however, does not dismiss the political significance and empowering aspects of that image of “guardians of the forest” for traditionally marginalized forest-dependent people, but rather demonstrates that none of this is as straightforward as one might think and asks us to think more deeply (see the chapter by Eghenter and Sellato).

The collection is also a testament to the benefits and challenges of not only trying to build local interests and skills in social science research, but also taking seriously the question of whether embarking

on research is important and meaningful for local people. C&C was exceptional in its explicit goal of building local research capacity, which from ethical, scientific, efficiency, and sustainability perspectives seems to make perfect sense — indeed perhaps the only sense as we, academics and practitioners, have had to come to terms with the collapsing of dichotomies that were once conventional wisdom (researchers versus subjects, isolated communities versus global flows of resources, and nature versus society) in a world of shrinking research budgets. And yet, this volume is frank in discussing the drawbacks and trade-offs that come with creating an enabling environment for interest in and building the capacity of local researchers (see the chapter by Eghenter and Sellato).

The volume does have a few shortcomings. The chapters are uneven in substance and quality, which is perhaps a difficult trade-off to overcome when one of the key goals of the research project itself is to build local research capacity, often from nil, within a limited span of time. Thus, while description and documentation are of high quality, analyses often do not achieve the same standard. Further, except for the introductory chapter, the individual contributions for the most part draw analytical boundaries around the village and village life. The interaction between village realities and broader social, economic, and political dynamics is somewhat lacking — questions about where the state is in all of this are left unanswered. On a related point, although individual chapters offer interesting analyses of various facets of village life, the usefulness or connections to conservation and development interventions are not spelled out. The reader is often left with the question of how the information in a given chapter can be used in a conservation and/or development intervention.

This book speaks to several, overlapping audiences, namely, academics and practitioners interested in the links between (1) conservation and development, (2) research and practice, and (3) interdisciplinarity — its conceptualization, operationalization, and subsequent results. The book is also “data rich”, providing a wealth of information for those interested in the social and historical aspects of village life in interior Borneo, specifically, and hill tribes. The collection as a whole contributes to

the literature in political ecology, environmental anthropology, and the sociology of science, as well as being an important addition to the ethnographic and historical studies of Dayak.

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