
Malaysia: Penan indigenous people and protected areas in Sarawak

The concept of nature without -and in most cases excluding- people, which fed natural areas conservation theory in the past decades, is still being applied in as different countries as India (see WRM Bulletin 20) and Brazil (see WRM Bulletin 28). Even though the principles of sustainable forest management internationally adopted recognize the importance of the full participation of local communities in all levels of forest management, in several cases local dwellers are seen as a threat for nature conservation. Reality counters this vision, since they are generally directly responsible for keeping protected areas -which are their home and source of livelihoods- alive and functional.

In Sarawak, a number of Penan communities in the Apoh, Tutoh, Layun and Patah areas in the Baram District, Miri Division are appealing to the State authorities to stop carrying out survey works by the Forest Department on their traditional lands. The survey is being undertaken for the creation of the Apoh/Tutoh Forest Reserves and Maringgong Protected Forests. The claims of the indigenous peoples are based on the grounds that the affected Penan have objected -from its very beginning in 1998- the project of converting their customary lands into forest reserves, and fear that the security of their people and their vital resources in their respective areas could be jeopardised if outsiders encroached into their territories without their prior knowledge and approval. They urge the Forest Department and the Sarawak Government to cease all survey work in the affected areas immediately.

The environmental NGO Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) shares the concerns and anxieties raised by the affected Penan and is urging the State Government to heed to the Penans' demands and cease all survey works in the affected areas. SAM is of the view that the move to constitute large areas of lands and forests which encompass customary lands of the native communities as forest reserves or protected forests in complete disregard of the rights of indigenous communities is not only contrary to law, but would also lead to the loss of control over their lands and their own future.

In most cases in Sarawak "forest reserves" and "protected forests" are anything but that: they are granted to timber companies or used for other "development" purposes. If these forests are indeed devoted to conservation proposals, they should not result in the deprivation of the native communities to their ancestral lands. SAM emphasises the need to review laws and policies which enable the extinguishment of native customary rights before any forest areas are constituted as Permanent Forest Estates (as forest reserves or protected forests). Until this happens, conflicts between the government and the communities and between the communities and the timber and plantation companies will increase.

Article based on information from: "Penans appeal to Sarawak government to respect native claims", Sahabat Alam Malaysia, Press Release, 23 May 2000

