

The Cultured Rainforest: long-term ecological histories in the highlands of Borneo

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Start Date: 1 April 2007, Duration: 36 months



Rainforests are frequently described as the world's last 'virgin landscape.' However, recent work in tropical Southeast Asia has shown that hunter gatherers were modifying rainforest by clearing and burning over 40,000 years ago. In contrast, some present-day hunter-gatherers, rather than being remnants of an ancient way of life, may in fact be a relatively recent response to landscapes created by farmers. Many of today's rainforest peoples are both foragers and farmers and, historically, have moved in both directions along a continuum between the two. How has the rainforest shaped the lives of forest-dwellers and how have they shaped the rainforest? To answer these questions, this project will chart the time-depth of human action that has shaped a Southeast Asian rainforest and reveal its changing character. We shall avoid a simplistic division between 'nature' and culture and concentrate on the symbiosis between the shaping of people and their physical world.

The project will involve interdisciplinary collaboration. Anthropologists and historians will provide a detailed picture of human-rainforest relations today and in the recent past and archaeologists and environmental scientists will try to determine sequences of long-term landscape change over the past 40,000 years. The project will have three main strands. Anthropologists will collect information on present-day forest life and the past as people remember or imagine it. They will study how objects are used today and will look at museum collections to reconstruct the role of material culture in the past. Archaeologists will conduct surveys, excavate selected monuments and, using a range of innovative techniques, reconstruct the lives of past forest dwellers from deep prehistory to recent times. Palaeoecologists will study fossil pollen to document the long-term history of the forest and human impact upon it.

The Kelabit highlands, Sarawak, Borneo are an ideal study area as they are inhabited by both Kelabit rice farmers and Penan hunter-gatherers. The antiquity of rice cultivation and the past role of other crops in highland Borneo are unknown but the potential antiquity of forest habitation is indicated by a wide range of archaeological monuments. An important motivation underlying all our work is to help the people of the Kelabit Highlands navigate an uncertain future as their forest environment is increasingly lost to logging.