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**A Biocultural Perspective for Heritage Conservation in Ulu Papar, Sabah:  
the importance of culture the Crocker Range Biosphere Reserve Nomination**

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The last decade has seen an interesting turn of events in the debate about communities and conservation. Rising from concerns about how local people impact the integrity of nature, a fresh angle has emerged that is concerned about how they are connected with nature. This biocultural view is based on the premise that diversity of life includes the human cultures and languages that have co-evolved with nature over time (Maffi, 2007). Forests, in this regard, bear the cultural imprint of a community's history and identity, in the same way that a community's way of life and culture is shaped by the use and access of natural resources and landscapes found in forests where they live. This biocultural perspective has positioned the conservation debate around our ability and willingness to understand the "inextricable links" between people and nature.

This evolving discourse is, in part, captured through the concept of Indigenous Peoples' and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs, also formerly referred to as CCAs), which recognises the good conservation work carried out by communities who seek to protect the lands and resources important for them (Borrini-Feyerabend and Kothari, 2008). The IUCN defines ICCAs as "natural and/or modified ecosystems containing significant biodiversity values, ecological services and cultural values, voluntarily conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities, both sedentary and mobile, through customary laws or other effective means". Recognition from the IUCN is strong evidence that the international conservation agenda is aware of how indigenous communities are compatible with, and indeed have long been the proactive agents in the conservation of local resources and landscapes they value and rely on (Stevens, 2010). Kothari (2006: 1) notes "[t]wo events advancing such recognition were the IUCN World Parks Congress (WPC, Durban 2003) and the VIIth Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, Kuala Lumpur 2004). Both of these meetings, attended by thousands of conservationists from virtually all countries on the planet, endorsed the need to recognise CCAs as an important phenomenon. The CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas has explicitly committed countries to recognise, support and take other action regarding CCAs by 2008".

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Despite these international commitments, to which Malaysia is party, the recognition of community-based conservation remains a complex and sometimes controversial issue for Sabah. There is a tepid and cautious optimism in the minority voice in government that is gradually warming to the idea of acknowledging communities as partners in state-driven conservation initiatives. Coupled with this is an increasing awareness and curiosity amongst the majority of how communities are interconnected with the natural environment around them, and how culture can be an asset in driving conservation. In a recently commissioned review for the Sabah Biodiversity Centre, Majid-Cooke and Vaz (2011) found that communities interested in conserving ancestral territories do so not purely for the biodiversity values, but also (and sometimes, more so) for the cultural values of these lands as places of common ancestry and cultural identity. The authors repositioned the Sabahan focus on “culture as an asset to conservation” to “culture as an intrinsic element of nature”.

We explore the cultural values of Ulu Papar, one of the more unique community conservation areas in Sabah. Ulu Papar refers to the upper catchment area of the Papar River, a remote place located deep inside the Crocker Range in the District of Penampang. For generations and certainly pre-dating the formation of Malaysia, indigenous Dusun communities have lived at least in part of this area, practicing a way of life that is closely interlinked with the natural resources and landscapes of Ulu Papar. Forests are modified, allowed to rejuvenate and protected, and in turn, this forest mosaic supports a diversity of resource pools they depend on for survival. Formed over time, this inter-relationship is the basis for the cultural values of Ulu Papar.

In 1969, large portions of Ulu Papar were gazetted within the Crocker Range Forest Reserve, incorporating some these perceived indigenous territories part of a state protected area. Later, in 1984, the Forest Reserve was converted to the Crocker Range Park, a fully protected area under the jurisdiction of Sabah Parks, the State government agency responsible for park management in Sabah. This sequence of events and the pursuant prohibitions on access to resources and landscapes inside the Park came to be a long-standing source of distress for the Ulu Papar Dusun (also Long *et al.* 2003). The impact is, understandably, vivid for many in Ulu Papar who witnessed this change in status from ‘freely-accessed lands’ to ‘strictly-prohibited state park’ in the space of their own lifetime.

Unable to reverse this legacy of Sabah’s protected area history, Sabah Parks has been trying to find ways to accommodate the needs of communities that are partly dependent on the forest in the Crocker Range, including the recent proposal to establish community use zones that would enable designated areas inside the Park to be specially allocated for local livelihoods, in recognition of communities’ inter-relationship with the resources and landscapes found here (Sabah Parks 2006). Having to contend with critics who claim a weak deal has been offered to communities while at the same time grappling with a legal system that does not enable, nor encourage, community governance over resources and landscapes, Sabah Parks has offered this compromise, which has been tenuously accepted as a practical first step forward in a much bigger journey towards resolving the conflict (Pacos Trust 2004).

As part of exploring how community use is compatible with the conservation priorities of the Park, a consortium of partners<sup>4</sup> conducted a series of research projects<sup>5</sup> to investigate community livelihoods in Ulu Papar. Since 2004, more than 300 community members from Ulu Papar have contributed data on the key ethnobiological resources and landscapes important for them. Working in an integrated team, community members and park personnel carried out participatory resource monitoring of subsistence activities, including the opening of swidden fields, subsistence hunting and harvesting of forest products. This effort to document the way of life and locations of important resources and landscapes is aimed at informing the process of demarcating the community use zone, deliberating the sub-zoning of lands outside of the Park, and enabling the development of community-based resource protocols that would seek to balance livelihood needs and biodiversity conservation priorities. A proposal to nominate Crocker Range Park as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, which requires extensive consultation with local communities, has raised the profile of this unique collaboration.

As a result of this research, an impressive corpus of information has been amassed that constructs a remarkable picture of the intimate and complex connection between the Ulu Papar Dusun and their natural surroundings (George 2005, Global Diversity Foundation, 2009, Nais 2006). For example, we found that community members, on average, have names for more than 30 distinct land and forest categories, ranging from primary forests, secondary forests of different ages, to areas at various stages of forest regeneration. They can describe in detail the characteristics and uses of each land or forest type. We also found similar levels of richness in their knowledge of plants, animals and soils, across all ages and genders, with the average adult community member able to name about 500 plants and about 400 animals found in the area. Community members regularly use more than 250 types of plants found in Ulu Papar, principally for medicine, food and construction materials. It is a vibrant body of knowledge embodied not only in the way residents conceptualise and speak about nature, but also in the way they physically interact with their environment and how the features of the natural landscape and peculiarities of particular natural resources influence the way they conduct their daily lives.

For them, the bounty of Ulu Papar is found in the entire landscape - as a continuum - from primary forests to riparian vegetation to cultivated lands and managed forest groves. While a great deal of cultivation occurs outside of the Park, areas inside the Park are equally important sources of subsistence. Results show that people sustainably harvest more than 40% of their medicinal plants and more than 50% of the rattans they require for subsistence from areas inside the Park. As a cultural collective, the Ulu Papar Dusun possess a tremendous degree of skill-based knowledge they have developed over time, through a process of trial and error, innovation and adaptation, which has evolved into a way of life that is adept at harnessing natural resources and landscapes for survival.

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<sup>4</sup> The consortium of partners is led by Sabah Parks, Global Diversity Foundation and the Ulu Papar community, and over the years, has included the Sabah Biodiversity Centre, Pacos Trust and University Malaysia Sabah.

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This extensive knowledge is also reflected in the folk stories and local myths of Ulu Papar. Passed orally from one generation to the next, these stories are amongst the most valued repositories of cultural knowledge that trace the history of these communities and the way they have co-existed with the natural resources and landscapes of Ulu Papar until today. From stories of place names to ancient hilltop homesteads, of magic and new-found belief, to tales of wars fought and reconciled in oaths that were sealed in blood and cast on stones scattered throughout the deepest forests of Ulu Papar, these stories live in the landscape itself. It is both an historical account and a political representation of Ulu Papar Dusun governance of these landscapes, which has not been adequately transcribed, captured or reflected - and at worst, erased - in the post-colonial legalisation of property relations (Doolittle 2001; Howitt 2006).

Thus, while our research started out with the principal intention of documenting resource use patterns, we *also* uncovered an unfolding story of Ulu Papar as an evolving cultural landscape. Scattered through the forests and fields of Ulu Papar are ancestral graveyards and burial jars located deep inside old secondary forests that remain protected as the sacred resting place of venerated ancestors. The study found etchings on stone monoliths and stone markers from a bygone headhunting era, now located inside protected forest groves and steeped in legends of mighty Dusun warriors. Just as these stories are preserved through transmission across generations, many of these sites are fiercely protected by the community, often with strict restrictions on resource harvesting and land conversion in particular areas. This is a clear example of how a community's effort to preserve the cultural imprint of their history and identity on natural landscape has led to the conservation of water catchments, forest groves, and riparian reserves.

These oral histories<sup>6</sup> additionally provide accounts that describe the settlement patterns of this area, with stories that tell of the droughts and floods that persuaded interior Dusuns to migrate in search of better fortunes along the coastlines of Sabah. The village of Kionop, in particular, is said to have once been a large and prosperous community and a centre of the Dusun migration to the coast. Numerous ancient trade routes criss-cross the Crocker Range, from the famous Salt Trail now promoted for tourism, to many other rugged salt-trading trails known only to community members in Ulu Papar.

Today, Ulu Papar is populated by about 1,000 indigenous Dusun people living in several small villages that remain, for the most part, still unreachable by road. Hidden from public view and at least partially protected from the rapid influx of market capitalism and globalisation, the Ulu Papar Dusun are a beacon of viable traditional ecological knowledge and livelihoods that has endured, despite the protected area prohibitions that restrict their access to much of the lands inside the Crocker Range Park where they have lived, cultivated and roamed (also Long *et al.* 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> The names of sources have not been included in this paper for reasons of privacy and confidentiality of community custodians of traditional knowledge.

At international levels, these resilient traditional ways of life are increasingly felt to hold valuable clues to resolving some of the most pertinent global issues today, ranging from food security and healthcare, to climate change. There is increasing consensus that local development strategies should also take into account the heterogeneity of rural livelihoods and lifestyles in a quest to build on and strengthen diversity and sustainability (Gibson *et al.* 2010). This perspective is less evident in Sabah, where traditional ways of life and customary uses of natural resources continue to be perceived as backward and less productive - or at best, nostalgic - artifacts of a bygone era that should be replaced through the modernising influence of development. Dominant sectors of Sabah continue to propagate these ideas that may under-value community use of resources (Doolittle 2004, also Puri & Donovan 2004). The cultural values of nature, as *a priori* criteria for nature conservation, are inadequately emphasised. This diminishes the significance of self-governance and contributes to the exclusion of communities in the custodianship of the resources and extensive lands of their ancestors (also Howitt 2006). It is a policy process that is in danger of overlooking the commitment of 197 nation states - including Malaysia - to safeguard the traditional ways of life and customary use of natural resources, as reflected in the ratification and localised implementation of key international instruments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Stevens 2010).

While it is often proclaimed that credit for biodiversity and water catchment conservation is due to the success of state-driven initiatives, recognition should also be given to the role of the Ulu Papar Dusun in protecting their ancestral lands for the period that pre-dates the 1969 advent of state protection of the Crocker Range. Certainly, our research suggests a deep cultural connection between these people and their lands dating back for generations. It portrays a way of living, speaking and thinking - in other words, a culture - that is interconnected with how they access and use the natural resources and landscapes around them. As the people who are, arguably, the most knowledgeable about these lands and perhaps the most protective of its bounty, it seems sensible - and just - to trust them as partners in the conservation and sustainable use of Ulu Papar. State agencies and civil society can strengthen the grassroots by providing technical support, and more importantly, recognition for community-driven conservation success in Ulu Papar.

As Sabah prepares to meet the changing challenges of competing global priorities, it is worth asking how progressive development can benefit the perseverance of our cultural heritage, particularly one as vivid and resilient as that of the Ulu Papar Dusun. Although dispersed in various laws and perhaps inadequate for the task, there are provisions that would allow protection of Ulu Papar as an ICCA under Section 78(1) of the Sabah Land Ordinance Cap 68, Section 38 of the Sabah Water Resources Enactment, Section 4(1)(b) of the Sabah Cultural Heritage Conservation Enactment, and Section 9(1)(j) of the Sabah Biodiversity Enactment. In other words, immediate steps can be taken to recognise, validate, and support community conservation areas and endeavors, as part of a Biosphere Reserve and other long-term commitments to safeguarding Sabah's living biocultural heritage. Whether this is a priority for conservation in Sabah is best answered by asking about our own ability and willingness to understand the "inextricable links"

between people and nature as exemplified by the Ulu Papar Dusun of the Crocker Range.

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## Sabah Laws

Cultural Heritage (Conservation) Enactment 1997

Land Ordinance Cap. 68

Sabah Biodiversity Enactment 2000

Sabah Water Resources Enactment 1998