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Environmental Advocacy Networks

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The Campaign against Deforestation in Sarawak

A case of deforestation that began to receive considerable attention in the late 1980s was the extremely rapid logging of tropical timber in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. Logging had already decimated the forests of neighboring Sabah, but received little public attention. Sarawak was different, for three reasons: (1) a change in the international institutional context for discussion of tropical forestry issues, with establishment of the International Tropical Timber Organization, provided a new campaign focus, following upon a relatively successful effort to target a similar organization on the whaling issue; (2) strong connections between deforestation and native land rights issues brought environmental and indigenous rights campaigners together, especially in Europe, and the actions of Bruno Manser, an amateur anthropologist who had lived with a nomadic people in Sarawak called the Penan, dramatized their plight; and (3) the case was taken up vigorously by a Malaysian organization, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, that was already a member of Friends of the Earth International as well as several other mainly southern, transnational networks.

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Background

Sarawak and Sabah are the two Malaysian states located on the northern coast of Borneo. They enjoy significant autonomy under the country's federal system, with the ability to control customs, civil service, and immigration (Sarawak requires a passport for visitors from peninsular Malaysia). Sarawak also controls the revenues from timber concessions, the result of an agreement at the time of joining the federation that gave peninsular Malaysia, in return, control over oil revenues. As a result of this deal, the federal government in Kuala Lumpur has been able to deny responsibility for logging practices in Sarawak.

With the exception of a severe recession in 1986, Malaysia's GNP has grown at 6–8 percent per annum since the early 1970s. A series of five-year plans have worked toward the goal, articulated in Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's "Vision 2020" program, of being a fully industrialized economy by the year 2020. Industry currently represents around 70 percent of the nation's exports. Timber is second to oil as a revenue producer in the primary sector.

The country is a multi-ethnic state. The shadow of ethnic conflict has hung heavily over Malaysia since an explosion of violence in 1969. Although preferential treatment is given to Malays, the benefits of development are very widely distributed. Given the image of rapid modernization which is currently a central component of Malaysia's political identity, the idea that Dayak (indigenous) land rights should be secured in part to preserve traditional lifeways commonly portrayed as backward does not fit with the image of a country racing toward the twenty-first century. Malaysia has been ruled by a large multi-party coalition headed by the UMNO-Baru (United Malays National Organization), a Muslim–Malay party, since independence in 1957, and overtly ethnic politics is seen by dominant groups as potentially destabilizing.

Logging in peninsular Malaysia declined significantly between 1975 and 1985 as a conservationist National Forestry Policy (which does not affect Sarawak and Sabah) came into effect. At the same time, log output in Sarawak increased from 4.4 million cubic meters in 1976 to 12.2 million in 1985. Although in theory logging in Sarawak was tightly controlled from the outset, enforcement has been practically nonexistent; both the geographical constraints of hill logging and the economic incentives for cutting beyond the targets are very strong. Briefly, timber concessions under the control of state politicians are granted (sold) for short-term logging licences to timber companies, whose motivation to log selectively and with care in areas designated for protection is virtually nil.

Logging decimated traditional forms of livelihood, meanwhile accelerating the integration of Dayak communities into the state's cash economy. Although logging brought short-term jobs to native communities, it eroded soils, polluted rivers and reduced fish stocks, eliminated wildlife formerly hunted for food, and increased flooding. Employment benefits ended when the logging companies moved on to the next area. Attempts by Dayak communities to gain the rights to log in their own areas have been unsuccessful, as have most attempts to have areas declared communal forests and thus protected from the loggers. Making land rights effective has been a losing struggle in the state. Logging hit especially hard for the still partially nomadic Penan people of the Baram region, for whom the forest provided food and home.

Dayak resistance came to international attention beginning in March 1987, when the Penan set up barricades on logging roads in the Upper Baram. Use of this tactic quickly spread throughout the region to other Dayak groups (the Kenyah, Kayan, Lambawang, and Kelabit). Activities in at least sixteen logging camps were halted. Although this is not the first time that barricades were used against loggers, it is the first time they were part of a sustained campaign, and the first time the resistance received so much attention.

What elements projected the Sarawak conflicts onto a broader stage in 1987? First, interrelated political crises at the national and state levels amplified their importance. Malaysia had undergone a severe recession in 1986, with per capita income declining by 15.7 percent. Criticism of the government became pervasive both in the governing coalition and the opposition, mainly concerning access to decision-making. Within Sarawak, rising Dayak nationalism since 1983 had spawned the first explicitly ethnic political party in the state (Parti Bansa Dayak Sarawak – PBDS). Prime Minister Mahathir began to fear for his coalition. In addition, by early March 1987 Sarawak was in the midst of its own political crisis, significant for the present story because of revelations about official corruption in granting timber concessions. This multifaceted crisis formed the backdrop for the logging blockades.

Second, tropical forests had become increasingly visible on the international agenda by the mid-1980s. In March 1983 sixty-four countries had agreed to establish an International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). Composed of producers and consumers of tropical timber, the new group was given a mandate to consider global resource management issues. Then in 1985, declared the International Year of the Forest, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Bank, and the UN Development Program, working with the World Resources Institute, produced the Tropical Forestry Action Plan and published "Tropical Forests: A Call for Action." The resulting International Tropical Forest Timber Agreement and Action Plan, passed in June 1986 in Geneva, was to be implemented by the International Tropical Timber Organization, headquartered in Yokohama, Japan. The ITTO council met for the first time in March 1987, at the same time that the blockades of logging roads began to spread throughout the Baram region of Sarawak. […]

The third factor that brought Sarawak logging wide attention was that local protests were linked to international publics through two different network nodes. One was the charismatic (and enigmatic) Bruno Manser, a Swiss national who had lived with the Penan for a number of years and who apparently helped to organize the blockade; and the other was Sahabat Alam Malaysia, one of a set of interrelated organizations based in Penang. Involved in a variety of environmental campaigns in peninsular Malaysia, SAM had an office in Marudi, Sarawak, run by Harrison Ngau, a Kayan from the Baram region. SAM was also the Malaysian member of Friends of the Earth International. SAM provided logistical support for the blockades, and arranged for twelve native representatives to go to Kuala Lumpur, where they met with the acting prime minister and a variety of high government officials. Although Dayak customary rights to land were recognized in law, the state government continued to violate them.

Before the blockades in 1987, forest campaigners had already begun to mount an international campaign involving deforestation in the region. At a meeting of FOE

International in Penang in September 1986, everyone was looking for a way to influence the tropical timber trade, especially with regard to Japan. FOE–UK promoted the view that a campaign needed an institutional lever such as International Tropical Timber Organization. Experience with the International Whaling Commission in the antiwhaling campaign was undoubtedly a factor in that assessment. Others preferred to work for export bans and timber boycotts. Although organizations in the network concentrated on different aspects of the campaign, these were not seen as mutually exclusive. […]

Despite passages of a forest amendment bill in late 1987 that made interfering with logging operations a criminal act punishable with a heavy fine and imprisonment, the blockades were repeated. From 1988 into the 1990s, they offered a powerful symbol of resistance and a continuing stimulus to network activities though they were of little value in producing concessions from state officials. Although the Penan Association and longhouse organizations continued to try to gain land titles or communal forest designations, the logging went on.

Framing the Sarawak conflict

The Sarawak campaign has different meanings for different groups of proponents. For people influenced by the experiences of Bruno Manser, who emerged from his hiding place in the forest and somehow returned to Europe in 1990, the nomadic Penan tribesmen were the symbolic center of the story. Organizing with the Penan at the center has created powerful images of an exotic and lost people fighting a heroic battle for the forest in the interest, it is implied, of all of us. Not surprisingly, this vision of the conflict has generated the most powerful media images. Filmmakers, journalists, and photographers have in the main placed the Penan at the center of their accounts. Although the Penan are indeed an important part of the Sarawak story, several other frames have produced different kinds of strategies and engaged different constellations of actors.

Some organizations, including the World Rainforest Movement's Forest Peoples' Program, SAM, Survival International, and *The Ecologist*, have placed primary emphasis on indigenous land rights, which is also a central issue in Evelyne Hong's influential book *Natives of Sarawak*. Without secure land title, they argue, the structural inequalities that prevent Dayak populations from resisting timber interests can never be addressed. This cogent vision of the problem is less resonant internationally than the Penan story, and one with which transnational networks have more difficulty organizing. The causal chain is fairly long, and the remedies difficult to devise.

The other main transnational strategy that emerged from the Sarawak case was its embedding in a broader campaign around tropical or rainforest timber (and in some cases temperate and boreal timber as well). This decentralized strategy has allowed space for considerable variation in organizational activities. Its main components have been consumer boycotts, targeting corporations and particular kinds of businesses (Mitsubishi, Do-it-Yourself stores, for example), persuading local or state governments to refrain from using tropical timber in construction projects, pressuring national governments and the European Union for tropical timber bans,

pressuring ITTO members to develop sustainability requirements, and, increasingly, "eco-labeling." A large number of organizations have adopted these strategies, shared information, and collaborated on certain activities, though sometimes disagreeing over where to direct energies at particular stages.

This campaign involves a number of loosely connected subcampaigns with different organizational sponsors. A central role, though not always a coordinating one, has belonged to the constellation of organizations headquartered in Penang – SAM, the Asian-Pacific People's Environmental Network, the Third World Network, and the World Rainforest Movement. By the early 1990s the campaign was focused on logging in Papua New Guinea, Guyana, and Brazil (in all of which Sarawak logging companies have expanded their operations). […]

Campaign strategies around Sarawak's forests

The Sarawak campaign's efforts to set in motion a boomerang strategy had some effect, but fell far short of success. From taking Dayak representatives to meet with officials in Kuala Lumpur and foreign capitals to contesting the information Malaysian representatives presented in international forums, the network mobilized vast quantities of information and testimony. Repeated barricades of logging roads were powerful symbols of resistance. Demanding that the Malaysian federal government intervene to control or block log exports from Sarawak, the network hoped to exert moral leverage. No effective material leverage was available – no World Bank loans in relevant areas, for example, or strategically placed aid programs. However, because Malaysia aspired to leadership in the Southeast Asian region, the idea that it would respond to moral leverage seemed a credible one. Moral leverage proved insufficient, however, to overcome Prime Minister Mahathir's dependence on the votes of Sarawak's political elites to maintain his broad coalition government. Moreover, there is some evidence that Mahathir's willingness to stand up to US and European critics on this issue may even have enhanced his regional prestige.

Beyond the matter of leverage, however, the tropical timber campaign implicitly proposed a different kind of relationship between north and south than existed in the Brazilian case. From the perspective of most of the Sarawak campaigners, the blame for overexploitation of timber in the region belonged even more to importers than it did to the exporter. Without demand, went the argument, there would be no supply. Thus the campaign was framed and focused quite differently from those waged around World Bank projects; instead of focusing the energies of activists in developed countries on a developing country target, it asked them to target their efforts at home.

The reasons for the difference were both ideological and logistical. First, there was no single source of leverage that provided the same purchase over the Sarawak situation that the World Bank seemed to offer in Rondônia. The central government's insistence that it had no authority over timber extraction in Sarawak was not a fiction; the tradeoff between centralizing oil revenues and leaving timber revenues to the states of East Malaysia had been a crucial compromise at the time of federation. For Sarawak's politicians, growing rich from timber concessions, there was simply no incentive – positive or negative – to stop logging. Because of Mahathir's dependence

on a very broad coalition, the political costs of attempting to intervene might have been very high. Furthermore, the Malaysian NGOs that provided the bridge between the Dayak populations in Sarawak and the transnational network were not anti-development – though they wanted to see development's fruits distributed more justly – and believed that first-world governments and NGOs should not use the environmental issue as a weapon to prevent third-world countries from developing autonomously. This argument was especially salient in international debates during the preparatory process for the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. The tropical timber campaign therefore focused attention on the industrialized world, that rabidly consumed Sarawak's tropical hardwoods.

The tropical timber campaign and its effects

Campaigning around tropical timber had the advantage of decentralization, which allowed for a variety of activities and styles – from Rainforest Action Network activists climbing Mitsubishi office buildings to hang boycott banners and parading with huge Godzilla figures to protest Japanese tropical hardwood imports, to WWF's more sober negotiations over sustainability guidelines with corporations.

Organizations in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands launched boycotts in 1988. On a motion from a Dutch Green party delegate, the European Parliament voted in 1988 to recommend Malaysian timber bans to European Union (EU) members until its logging became sustainable. The EU Commission subsequently overturned that recommendation, but as a symbol of protest it garnered much publicity. In May 1989 Australia's Rainforest Action Group, which had already called for a boycott, deployed swimmers and kayaks to Malaysian timber-bearing ships. The Rainforest Action Network in the United States declared a boycott of Mitsubishi, and Friends of the Earth did the same in Europe.

In addition to corporate boycotts, environmental organizations organized hundreds of local government boycotts of the use of tropical timber in municipal construction. This strategy was very successful in Europe; by November 1990 local boycotts had so incensed Malaysians and Indonesians that they threatened trade retaliations. In 1993 and 1994 Japanese activists stepped up a similar local campaign.

These protests had little effect on logging. In 1990, timber operators in Sarawak cut a record eighteen million cubic meters of tropical hardwood logs. In early 1990, angry at foreign pressure, the Malaysian government had asked the ITTO to assess the question of sustainability. The ITTO team reported in May 1990 that Sarawak was logging at eight to ten times a sustainable level. The report recommended a reduction in log output by 1.5 million cubic meters a year. In 1992 the Sarawak government claimed it would comply with the recommendation, but regulations continued to be weakly enforced, and illegal logging is common.

But the trade issue had clearly become a serious one. In October 1991 Prime Minister Mahathir gave the keynote address at the meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economy ministers, saying that ASEAN countries must speak with one voice against campaigns linking trade and environmental issues, and that the threats these posed to development had reached serious proportions. […]

Measuring the impact of the tropical timber campaign requires that we define clearly the goals the campaign intended to reach. For those who wanted to preserve the nomadic lifeways of the Penan and the forest in which they lived, the campaign failed. Only a few hundred Penan remain in the forest. The rest live in longhouses, many work in timber camps and others suffer from the chronic unemployment that has beset communities throughout the region as the loggers move on. For those who wanted to fuel a struggle for land rights, the campaign continues. SAM has helped to organize several hundred community associations, for which security of tenure remains the precondition for any kind of community development activity. Although the transnational network does not exert direct leverage over this question, the campaign nonetheless provides some degree of protection to local efforts. For those who wanted to stop tropical timber logging in Sarawak, the campaign also failed. Sarawak will be logged out in five years, and Sarawakian timber companies are now repeating the process in Guyana and Papua New Guinea. The substantive goals of the Sarawak campaign, in other words, were not met.

In some respects, though, the efforts of the NGO networks and activists were remarkably successful. The Malaysian newspaper *Business Times* reported in October 1995, "Malaysia's timber exports to Europe have fallen by half since 1992 due to pressures from environmental groups on local and municipal governments in Europe to boycott or ban tropical timber products." Tropical timber imports into the Netherlands fell by 50 percent between 1990 and 1995, "mainly as a result of an NGO boycott campaign." Everyone seems to agree that the campaign succeeded in reducing consumption of tropical timber in some of the major importing countries.

If we see the tropical timber campaign as pursuing procedural rather than substantive goals, that is, a change in the international timber trading regime, then it has had some limited success. Campaign activities raised the salience of the issue and eventually placed it on the trade agenda. Unlike subsequent environmentalist attempts to use the trade agenda, as in the dispute over the effects of tuna fishing on dolphins, a forum was in place in which the issues could be ajudicated – the ITTO. Within the ITTO, beyond pressuring the institution to send investigative missions to logging areas and holding states accountable to their commitments, activists in the network have forced debates on the social dimensions of logging and on customary and common property arrangements. However, the new international tropical timber agreement negotiated in 1994 was far weaker than expected. […]

Conclusions

More than other network campaigns, rainforest campaigns are built on the tensions between recognizing structural causes and designing strategies that seek remedies by placing blame on, and influencing the behavior of, particular actors. Furthermore, the struggles they entail over meaning, power, and access to resources highlight the north–south dimension found in many network campaigns. The campaigns include participants whose understandings have been changed by their ongoing conversation with what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls people in out-of-the-way-places. And,

since these are stories about the real world, the campaigns include participants whose understandings have not been changed at all.

Environmental advocacy networks have not so much gotten the tropical forest issue onto the agenda – it was already there – as they have changed the tone of the debate. To the frequent consternation of the epistemic community of scientists and policymakers who had succeeded in placing it on the agenda initially, the advocacy networks deliberately politicized the issues. While the epistemic community had sought to design sound policies and tried on the basis of their authoritative knowledge to persuade governments to adopt them, advocacy networks looked for leverage over actors and institutions capable of making the desired changes. Advocacy networks also insisted on different criteria of expertise. Although they did not deny the expertise of the scientists, they demanded equal time for direct testimony about experience. And within the networks they also cultivated the strategic expertise of good organizers. The issue, especially for the multilateral bank campaigners, was not ultimately forests, or dams, or any other particular environmental issue, but leverage over institutions that make a difference.

The advocacy networks helped to broaden the definition of which information and whose knowledge should shape the agenda on tropical forest issues. In the process, they won seats at the bargaining table for new actors. Their campaigns created a new script for sustainable forest management projects, with roles for "local people," "NGOs," and so forth. We must be careful not to exaggerate the power of the individuals and groups that play these roles, relative to that of states, economic actors like corporations, or multilateral organizations (the Planafloro deliberative council is a good example). Nonetheless, once these roles have been legitimized, organizations like the World Bank must address them.

How much change have transnational advocacy networks produced in the tropical forest issue? Because the networks are not the only reform-minded actors engaged, exact attributions of influence are difficult. The multilateral development bank campaign would certainly not have had much success without the collaboration of network members inside the bank. At the levels of both discursive and procedural change the network has been remarkably successful. Multilateral development banks increasingly claim to be addressing environmental objectives in loans, and there is some evidence that they have begun to eliminate high-risk projects much earlier in the project evaluation cycle. Besides having adopted the discourse of sustainable development, the bank has also implemented important procedural changes, including the information policy. Under increased pressure from the United States after the 1989 Pelosi amendment, all of the multilateral banks are taking the environmental assessment process more seriously.

Similarly, though less dramatically, the tropical timber campaign has had considerable success in promoting discursive change and some success with procedural change as well. Malaysia, as well as other tropical forest states, has begun at least to use the discourse of sustainable forestry, whether or not much has changed in practice. Malaysia has also adopted action plans phasing out unsustainable logging, and has begun to encourage local wood processing. The ITTO has adopted somewhat more stringent standards for movement toward demonstrably sustainable forestry practices. Green labeling, about which forest campaign advocates are quite divided,

has not yet proved itself; should it change behavior in the ways that its proponents hope, this may stimulate further steps from the ITTO.

Among the people whose testimony generated the sharpest images of the impact of deforestation on lives, signs of success are harder to find. In Sarawak the transnational advocacy campaign has had very little impact. Logging goes on with its ecological and human impacts. […]