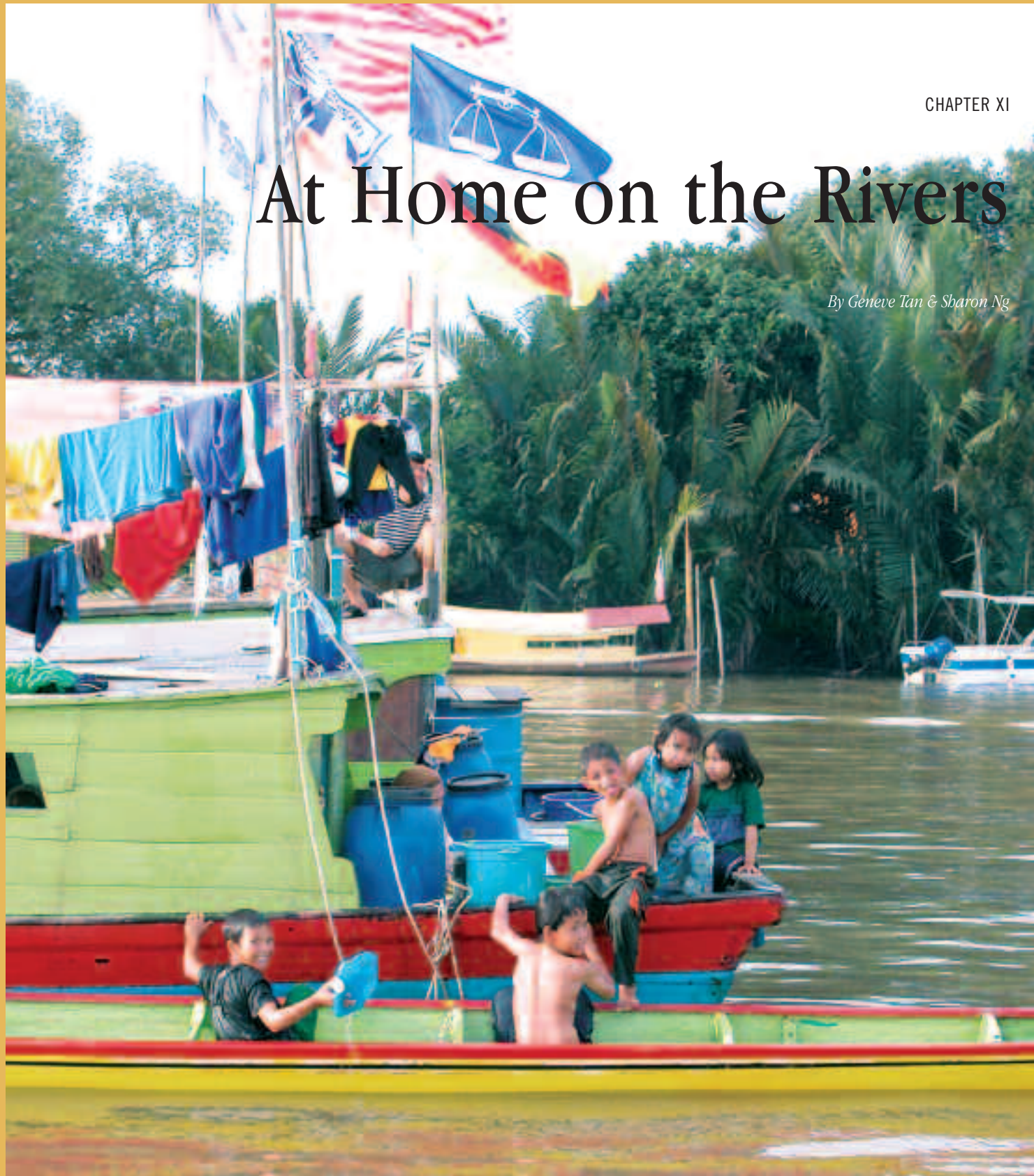


At Home on the Rivers

By Geneve Tan & Sharon Ng



There is a trend to create better living urban environments, great places to Live + Work + Play. In Sarawak, there are people who call the rivers their home, a place that offers security, but would hardly qualify as a great place to Live + Work + Play.

If you've ever been to Halong Bay in Vietnam, Aberdeen in Hong Kong, the lakes of Kathmandu or the canals of Amsterdam, you probably would have had the opportunity to share a meal or live amongst these working communities in their house boats. There is even a small number of wealthy Seattleites, wanting an alternative lifestyle, who pay US\$1.9 million for a two-bedroom houseboat on Lake Union.

In Sarawak, there is a small group of people, "River Gypsies," who call the rivers their home. For some, perhaps not by choice, living on the rivers is their only means of making a living.

Wong Tiong Heng has lived on board his double decker *kapal bandung* for seven years. As captain and storekeeper, he plies the Batang Rajang around Song, selling groceries to the longhouses along the river.

Although he has a house in Sibu, he spends, at most, two nights a month in the house. Usually, he docks his boat overnight at the wharf in Song. Wong has four children who go to school in Sibu. School holidays are the best for him, as the family gets to spend time together, living on board the boat. The children help out with the daily chores and customers and, at night, the boat's cockpit doubles up as their bedroom.

Jimmy lives on board an express boat that runs the Sibu to Putai route, along the Rajang and Boleh Rivers. He only goes home to Kapit once a year for three days. He can't afford to buy or rent a home in Sibu

Opposite: Children taking an evening bath in Sungai Sarawak.

or Putai on his salary, so he lives on board the boat, one night in Sibu, the next in Putai, based on the boat's schedule.

It is a solitary life, bathing and brushing his teeth in the river and buying his dinner from the local stalls and, when the lights go out at the Sibu Terminal, there's nothing else to do but go to bed in his cramped quarters.

At least Jimmy doesn't have to worry about his job. Abu, who lives part-time on the express boat from Marudi to Long Lama, has been working as a *cincu*, or boat crew, for over 15 years. Since 2005, when road access became available from Miri to Marudi and Miri to Long Lama, despite being only logging and plantation roads, passenger numbers have fallen from an average of 75 people a day to 20.

Two of his colleagues have been laid off. With the government's plans of constructing a tarred road from Miri to Long Lama, better air service to Mulu and rising petrol prices, some operators are expecting that the express boat service in the Baram will die a natural death. In fact, they have stopped investing in their boats, so Abu lives on board a boat with taped up plywood where there were once windows and gaping holes in the cushions of the seats.

He says that, unlike some of the younger guys, he is lucky. He used to sleep every night on board the boat in Long Lama but now he has a house in Marudi, where he spends more time since the service only operates three times a week. In his 60s, he looks forward to a peaceful retirement.

During the 2007 Kuching Regatta, we met a group of fisher folk, including women and children, from Sebuyau, Beladin and Meludam, who journeyed up to six hours by sea and river to reach Kuching. They were part of the support group for participants in the regatta.

There were eight boats moored in the Sungai Sarawak, not far from the Astana. In the evenings, with the breeze fluttering the drying clothes and flags on the roofs of the boats, the sound of the laughing children as they bathed in the river, the chatter of women as they made the evening meal and the smell of cooking, made the whole atmosphere very festive.

Jimmy's solitary life – at 5am he brushes his teeth and takes a bath in Batang Rajang.



Wong's holidaying children man the counter on the kapal bandung which plies Batang Rajang and sells groceries to the longhouses.

This was their one-week annual holiday, an opportunity to participate in the exhilaration of the competition and festivities along the waterfront during the regatta.

Most of the people we spoke to have no complaints about their lives on the rivers. But, in an urban environment, we expect basic necessities like running water, treated sewage and electricity. Upon entering all these floating homes, that not so delicate question had to be asked: "Where is the toilet and where does the sewage discharge?" Sad to say, the answer was always into the river.

It may seem negligible to worry about a few on board toilets discharging into the river when there are still a large number of houses without proper sewage systems and restaurants without grease traps emptying their discharge into the rivers of Sarawak.

But we read that a single weekend boater flushing untreated sewage into the rivers produces the same amount of bacterial pollution as 10,000 people whose sewage passes through a treatment plant. A scary thought when, for example, there are at least eight express services daily that ply Batang Rajang, with capacities of 75 to 170 persons each.

As the SIWT study looks at increasing activities on the river, one of the serious limitations is the quality of the river environment. Economics always trumps the environment. Still if we cannot treat the rivers like homes, with the provision of basic amenities, how then can we expect to invite more people to visit?

In Sarawak, there is a small group of people, "River Gypsies," who call the rivers their home. For some, perhaps not by choice, living on the rivers is their only means of making a living.



At home on the rivers, families going about their daily lives washing, cooking and looking after the kids.

Service to Your Doorstep

By Sharon Ng

In Sarawak, rivers have provided rural communities access to goods and, perhaps more importantly, education and basic services.

The rivers of Sarawak are God-sent infrastructure, which, in reality, we pay very little to develop or maintain. Yet, these rivers have long been the arteries to the interior, the sole means of access for goods, services and basic healthcare for many rural communities.

Since the late 1800s, missionaries brought religion and, more importantly, education to these rural communities. Along the Skrang and Kanowit rivers, the earliest primary schools were built in 1863 and 1886, respectively. A common language and understanding has helped unite the many diverse cultures and ethnic groups.

Some of the older education providers remember the hardship of travelling by boat and then hiking for kilometres to schools near the Indonesian borders, only to find that their bed was a wooden plank and the children paid a *cupak* (tin-full) of rice as school fees. Others remember that the rivers brought raw wheat and powdered milk in tins, American aid to combat



A kapal bandung, the floating provision shops of Sarawak's rivers that bring basic necessities to the rural river communities.

In Sarawak, rivers have provided access for goods to the rural communities and perhaps more importantly, access to education and basic services.

malnutrition in the rural communities and schools. If we look at a map of the Baram District schools, it is significant that over 90% of the 74 schools are located along the Tinjar, Baram, Apoh and Tutoh rivers.

Sibu has had a long history of shipbuilding, an industry that is growing along Batang Rajang.



The rivers still bring many other necessary services to the rural communities. In Sarikei, there is a mobile dentist unit, 40 dental nurses and assistants, who travel to over 100 schools a year in Sarikei and Mukah, providing basic dental healthcare. Out of the 18,000 students they treat, almost 6,000 are from rural schools only reachable by rivers and boats. Thirty-nine of the 40 nurses are women and they have difficulty carrying the dental chair and equipment and, sometimes, even their own generator by boat to some of the most difficult areas along Sungai Belawai in Mukah, where travel is dictated by the tides.

The Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) currently provides a 3-in-1 River Transport Permit (RTP) registration service for community boat operators involved in providing transport for riverine tourism in areas like the Maludam National Park. The RTP registration requires a three-stage process: the Marine Department issues a licence for the boat, private sector insurance agents insure the passengers and boatman and the SRB issues the permit for commercial use. Together with their partners, the Marine Department and insurance agents, SRB provides this service to ensure safety and

insurance for tourist and the boat operators in rural areas where operators cannot afford to travel to town to complete the registration.

Along the Batang Rajang, Lassa and Oya, you will sometimes see brightly coloured red and blue boats, or *kapal bandung*, with advertisements on the side. These are the rural floating supermarkets that bring groceries, gas tanks and soft drinks to many rural communities. For teachers like Cikgu Naraida and Cikgu Tham at SK Kampung Sawai, a visit by the floating supermarket from Sibu is their weekly highlight, as they look forward to their favourite coconut and *kaya* buns.

During a recent field visit by the SIWT National Steering Committee to experience firsthand the issues and potential of the Inland Water Transport System in Sarawak, members from the Economic Planning Unit, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Communication, the Sarawak Planning Unit, UNDP and SRB, agreed that the rivers are an untapped infrastructure resource. There is the potential to provide the rural communities with many more public services like mobile banks, libraries and hospitals through river transportation.

In certain areas in Daro in Mukah Division, only accessible by boats, there are no banks. Many of the civil servants who work in these areas, including teachers, have to travel to Sarikei or Sibu to withdraw their monthly salaries. Transportation is expensive and time-consuming, involving longboats and daily express boat services that depend on the tides, sometimes leaving only at four or five in the morning. Some pool their resources and take turns travelling to withdraw everyone's salary. This basic amenity of being able to conveniently and safely have access to your monthly salary is a basic necessity for the rural communities.

Throughout the history of Sarawak and, perhaps, increasingly in the future, the rivers will play a vital role in bringing goods, education and services to the doorsteps of many rural communities, bridging the divide between rural and urban communities.



Medical supplies arriving at a rural school along Batang Baleh, Kapit.



The locals prefer to sit on top of the express boats to keep an eye on their belongings. Due to limited services, the boats are often dangerously overloaded.

CHAPTER XIII

Restoring Sarawak's Arteries

By Sharon Ng

It's amazing to see the things that people bring home – not just crates of beer, but also live chickens, cartons of eggs, gas tanks, cupboards and mattresses.

The pace of life is speeding up. Rapid development in Sarawak has also brought an acceleration to the deterioration of its river environments.

There are 2,500 new stroke cases in Sarawak annually, many amongst the Ibans who make up 30% of Sarawak's population and account for 50% of the state's skilled construction workers. Strokes occur when blood flow to the brain is interrupted, most commonly due to clogging of arteries. It is estimated that if no action is taken to change our lifestyles, 25% of healthy life years may be lost to cardiovascular (CV) disease.

The rapid pace of economic development can be linked to the increasing incidents of CV and, similarly, we see the signs of Sarawak's development and its impact on its arteries, the rivers.

Thomas Jefferson was the first to refer to rivers as arteries of transportation through the body of a continent and, during the *Gawai balik kampung*, the role of the river as a primary artery to the interiors of Sarawak becomes strikingly clear. I was at the Sibu Terminal on 29th May 2007 to experience this mass exodus, as Sibu is the gateway to the interiors along the Batang Rajang through towns like Kanowit, Song, Kapit and Belaga.

At four in the morning, all is dark and silent along the Sibu Waterfront. Only when I approached the terminal did I start to see shadowy masses, smell chickens and broken eggs, hear the shouting of vendors and see a chattering mass of people with their belongings. They filled the entire car park in front of the terminal, waiting for the gates to open.

It's amazing to see the things that people bring home – not just crates of beer for the celebrations, but also live chickens, cartons of eggs, gas tanks, cupboards and mattresses, which are loaded on to the roofs of the express boats.

The terminal, a major node along the Rajang artery, is totally clogged with people, goods, shouting ticket collectors and children, looking lost and forlorn amongst their belongings as their parents go in search of an empty seat in the boats.

Early morning *balik kampung* rush at the Sibu Terminal.



Commuters at Song transferring from the express boats to longboats that take them into the interiors along Sungai Katibas.



Left: 4.00am at the entrance of the Sibu Terminal where families wait with their belongings to take the first boats to towns like Song, Kapit and Belaga along Batang Rajang; Right: Live chickens for sale outside the terminal, a must for the *Gawai* celebrations in the rural longhouses.



Chaos on the Sibu Terminal pontoons where express boats are overloaded with passengers and goods with no regard to safety.

To add to the chaos, one of the boats was delayed for half an hour as Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) officers evacuated the occupants seated on the roof of the boat, who were oblivious to the dangers of an overloaded boat going up the Pelagus Rapids to Belaga.

For Nancy Nyuling's family of seven children and five adults, the express boats are the most economical way to travel. The cost of an express ticket from Sibu to Belaga is approximately RM45 per person. Any other way of travel — by car or flight, for example, from Sibu to Bintulu, followed by a four-wheel drive from Bintulu to Belaga before taking a longboat home — will cost two or three times more. However, as people want to travel faster and more conveniently and as more roads and logging tracks open up, many are now taking alternative routes. From 1997 to 2004, the number of passengers using river transport has dropped from 5.5 million to 2.7 million in Sarawak.

On the journey up the Batang Rajang, I stopped in Song. The jetty was crammed with longboats waiting to take the express boat passengers on the next leg of the journey up to the longhouses along Sungai Katibas. Many of these private boats were overloaded with goods and passengers, some carrying up to 20 people when there should be, at most, six to eight persons.

The journey from Sibu to Belaga takes up to eight hours, depending on the number of stops and the level of the river's water. It's not the most pleasant of journeys if you're cooped up inside the boat cabins with a mass of people, chickens and the smell of overused toilets.

As Sarawak hopes to invite more foreign tourists to experience its rich culture and heritage, we should be concerned about the levels of service, convenience and safety along the rivers. Most tourists are fine with basic, simple amenities but will not tolerate conditions that are dirty, unsafe and disregard the natural environment.

Restoration of the rivers should focus not only on river cleanliness but also in reviving its role as a key mode of passenger and commercial traffic, revenue generators that will pay for costly maintenance, security and amenities along the rivers. Without these, it would be difficult to justify any significant actions that would benefit tourists and the local communities. We need to accelerate our initiatives to restore the rivers and usher in a new age of river transportation in Sarawak.

Inland Waterways: Potential and Drawbacks

By Riyung anak Barau & Chung Tsung Ping

Local communities believe that a ritual must be performed in order to appease the spirit who acts as a guardian of the Pelagus Rapids area.

The Pelagus Rapids are one of the highlights on the journey from Bakun to Kapit by express boat.

The characteristic of Sarawak's rivers are determined by the state's terrain and landscape and remains an important mode of access for the riverine communities. However, drawbacks of the river prove to be a challenge for many.

The rivers of Sarawak have been a vital mode of transport and human activity, especially in transporting goods, oils, logs and passengers. In Sarawak, river transport or inland waterway is still widely used, especially in connecting major towns to remote areas not accessible by roads.

Batang Kemena in Bintulu, for example, is commonly used by barges to transport logs from the upper river to nearby sawmill factories in town. Communities living along Batang Kemena, such as Tubau and Binyu, use passenger boats which operate twice a day to go to Bintulu. In Bintulu town itself, people who live across the river travel in longboats to go to work or to buy necessities in town. Looking into the future, Batang Kemena is potentially an attraction for tourists, given its still waters and the availability of rowing boats to transport passengers across the river. Complementing the beauty of the river, Batang Kemena is a suitable spot for recreational activities like water sports, fishing, sightseeing and boat rowing that can attract local as well as foreign visitors.

Nevertheless, there are some drawbacks that make Batang Kemena less suitable for transportation. Along the riverbanks, from Sarawak Rivers Board's (SRB) wharf located at the centre of Bintulu town to Kemena Bridge, are more than 10 active sawmill factories. Wood waste from these sawmills can contribute to river pollution, especially during flooding and tidal breaks. This will not only affect the beauty of nature but also cause accidents. Floating debris in the river poses a considerable amount of

danger to those who ply the rivers, especially to small boats. SRB monitors the industries along the riverbanks to ensure there is no discriminate disposal of wood waste.

Other potential river pollutants include log ponds without proper retaining walls, which could be a threat to river transport. Boat wrecks buried deep in the river can also cause accidents. One of SRB's functions includes the removal of wrecks. However, it is an expensive operation and, to ensure the rivers are free from wrecks, would require a partnership that engages the strengths and resources of public and private entities.

As we move from the still waters of Batang Kemena, dams that are built for hydro power using rivers can be potential products for riverine tourism. A three-hour journey from Bintulu in a four-wheel drive will bring one to the Assap Resettlement Village located between Bintulu and Bakun. The villagers here were relocated from Bakun and, from being a purely self-sufficient river community in Bakun, where the only means of transport was by longboats or express boats, they are now a land-based community. This

relocation has helped improve their livelihood as well as their quality of life thanks to better medical services. They also enjoy 24-hour electricity and clean water supply, increased job opportunities and better educational chances for their children.

One interior village that is still dependent on inland water transport is Kejaman Neh. From Assap Resettlement Village, one can travel in a four-wheel drive to Bakun for about an hour before proceeding to Kejaman Neh in a longboat for approximately 45 minutes. One will be fascinated by the breathtaking views during the journey that also passes through the Pelagus Rapids.

Folklore associated with the rapids includes the sound of gongs being heard a few days before an

The rivers of Sarawak are riddled with wrecks that pose a danger to riverine navigation.



Commuters waiting for the *penambang*s that ferry passenger from Bintulu town across the Batang Kemena to the local *kampungs*.

accident in the rapids. Local communities also believe that a ritual must be performed in order to appease the spirit who acts as a guardian of the Pelagus Rapids area, and is carried out as part of a request for the return of the victim by shamans from villages near the rivers.

The rivers provide access to amenities for the many riverine communities in Sarawak, especially for the villagers that we met along our travel route along Batang Kemena to the Pelagus Rapids and beyond. Rivers are also potential tourism products, be it for the culturally inclined visitors or for the more adventurous. However, one would need to be aware of the importance of caring and respecting our rivers by ensuring that they are not polluted and a hazard to those who rely on them as their main mode of transportation. Looking at its importance and considering the obstacles encountered by river communities, the SRB-UNDP partnership hopes to be able to empower stakeholders and other relevant authorities to develop and mobilise the potential of inland waterways for the benefit of all.



School children waiting to go home along the Batang Saribas, where river infrastructure is in dire need of improvement.

CHAPTER XV

Sarawak's River, Gaining a Child's Perspective

By Sharon Ng

When the final bell rings to signal the end of the school term, I would, if I were living in Peninsular Malaysia, generally see a long line of cars and buses, congestion on the main road in front of the school and the children rushing to board school buses or their parents' cars for a short ride home to freedom.

In many rural Sarawakian towns like Pusa, along the Batang Saribas, and Sebuyau, located at the mouth of the Batang Lupar, it is an altogether different scene. Most of the children leisurely make their way out of school on foot, some in their bright orange life jackets, for a short stroll down to the riverbank. Waiting at the river's edge, a string of small boats, often dilapidated and in need of a new coat of paint (or more), wait, to take the kids on either a short 30 sen ride to the opposite side of the riverbank. The boarders, who only go home once every two weeks or at the end of a school term, take a longer boat ride — of an hour or two — to their longhouses upriver.

As part of the Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport (SIWT) System Study's Education and Awareness Programme, a team of officers from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) travelled by express boat, penampang (the local river taxi), long boats and four-wheel drives to visit six rural schools in Pusa and Sebuyau. At times, it almost felt like being part of an *Amazing Race*, rushing to meet our scheduled appointments at the schools, yet not wanting to leave the beautiful river landscapes and gracious hospitality of the rural school teachers and children.

Marazuki, an SRB enforcement officer, teaches children in Sebuyau along the Batang Lupar how to use life-jackets correctly.



The purpose of going to these schools was to gain an insight into the river transportation network and seek the views of those who use this mode of transport daily. Using a short slide show on “Rivers and their Uses” and “River Safety and Cleanliness”, the team engaged the students and teachers in discussion and encouraged the students to take part in a drawing competition, sponsored by UNDP and SRB, to visualise their perspective of the rivers from a transportation, livelihood, recreation, industry or tourism point of view.

It was heartening to see that many of the children, especially from SK Pusa, were not only enthusiastic about putting their thoughts on Sarawak’s rivers and their uses onto an art block, but were also intelligent, interactive and well-spoken in Malay and English. Some primary school kids from SK Tebelu even came to our discussion with their colour pencils and drawing materials, all set to do some serious drawing.

For many children, the rivers are a wonderful source of fun and recreation, but in rivers like the Batang Lupar, where the legend of Bujang Senang lives on, most residents of towns like Pusa are wary of the rivers.

For many of the children, the rivers are a wonderful source of fun and recreation, but in rivers like the Batang Lupar, where the legend of Bujang Senang, the legendary man-eating giant white crocodile, lives on, most residents of towns like Pusa are wary of the rivers.

Throughout our visits, safety was often the primary issue raised, including the need for better maintenance of the wharfs and boat landing points and the shortage of safety equipment like life-jackets and floats.

It was also encouraging to see the efforts made by schools like SK Tuanku Bagus, Sebuyau, where the Headmaster, Wan Zainalabidin, has managed to persuade local banks and the Simunjan District Education Department to sponsor life-jackets for all students who use river transport to school. Other efforts included SMK Sebuyau’s Safety Awareness campaign held in April 2007. Organisations like SRB and other government authorities participated in the two-day seminar and exhibition that involved all students. It is this kind of collaboration between public and private sectors that will ensure greater awareness and safety along our rivers.