

Tourism on the Rivers

By Chung Tsung Ping & Sharon Ng

Tourists boarding an express boat in Belaga, an eight-hour ride along Batang Rajang to Sibiu.

300,000 foreigners come to Sarawak every year but less than 15% experience the state's rivers. While there is great potential for riverine tourism, managing expectations and environmental impacts are important to making it a sustainable economic activity.

While white water rafting in New Zealand, the guide told me a little secret. He usually selects a “victim”, a potential screamer, who would be intentionally tipped into the churning waters and then hauled out by their life-jackets, to the cheers of all the rafters on board.

Naturally, the tourists were not aware that this was a carefully choreographed event, which added to the thrill factor of the ride. He confided that it was a difficult job, balancing a little danger and excitement, enough for a good story when recounted later, with the safety of the tourist.

Sarawak's longhouse tourism is one of its most unique and popular tourism products, involving a stay at a longhouse, usually located along the rivers, and a longboat ride along some of the more picturesque rivers like the Skrang, Lemanak, Engkari and Batang Ai in Sri Aman or on the Tutoh, Melinau and Mendamit on the way to Mulu. In some areas, like Skrang and Batang Ai, communities and operators have been providing these tours since the 1980s.

In looking at the potential of increasing riverine tourism in Sarawak, the issue of providing good river transportation alone will not be sufficient. Attraction, attraction, attraction and how much the tourist is willing to part with to see that attraction is the key factor. Then, there are issues of rising petrol and transport costs and, in some areas, the deteriorating natural environment due to pollution and land development, and the lack of good and safe infrastructure like jetties are some of the other key problems raised during discussions with operators, government officials and tourist associations. In addition to reliable information, good service providers and informed and experienced guides are also important.

Managing expectations is one of the challenges in tourism. We sometimes hear complaints about the weather being hot and humid all the time, getting drenched by the rain, not having proper showers or modern flushing toilets, being bitten by insects and so on. These are all part of the package, part of the “wild Borneo” and its longhouse experience, which can be painful if you come unprepared. Yet, there are a small number of tourists who enjoy the experience, taking it as part and parcel of a rural longhouse experience.

In describing Burma, the author Amy Tan wrote, “that's what we visitors love, a rustic romanticism and antiquated prettiness, no electric power lines, telephone poles, or satellite television dishes to mar the view. Seek and you shall find your illusions through the magic of tourism”. Unfortunately, not all



The sheer limestone walls are part of the Mulu longboat experience along Sungai Melinau.

adventure seekers may have the same view. It is often difficult to balance the realities of nature, the communities' desires to modernise and the expectations of a tourist.

Talking to tourism operators in Kuching, longhouse and longboat tourism are only a small portion of their tourism business, as business-related travel with hotel stays generate better returns. It is a Catch-22 situation, where bulk bookings provide better income streams, but who wants to go to a tranquil river environment and find two or more bus loads of tourists boarding the boats!

Another common concern is the cost of river transport versus air transport and the time factor. For example, an irate local had to take the express boat from Marudi, and then pay RM300 for a longboat to take him upriver from Long Terawan to Mulu — a journey of up to four hours — because the flights were full. He was even more upset when, after paying all that money, they told

him that if the water level was low, he and his wife would have to get out and carry the boat! In comparison, a flight from Miri to Mulu would take less than an hour and cost, at most, RM150 per person.

Ironically, during a trip to Mulu with a friend from Australia, we spent two days walking 10km through the jungle, up 300 steps to see the caves and were drenched in the boats as it rained constantly. She was so exhausted by the end of the day that she slept at eight every night. Yet, at the end of a very enjoyable trip, she asked: "How come I didn't get to pull the boats upriver like they tell you in the guide books?" She was upset at having missed out on the full experience of riverine tourism in Sarawak.

Having spent a lot of time travelling on the rivers of Sarawak, it would seem that the rural community is an untapped resource in Sarawak where riverine tourism is concerned. As we have seen in Sarawak's



Early morning mist at Loagan Bunut, a quiet retreat.

"How come I didn't get to pull the boats upriver like they tell you in the guide books?"

– A tourist upset at having missed out on the full experience of riverine tourism in Sarawak



national parks, the best guides are often locals who have grown up in the area. They know the forest and they can recount the most interesting oral histories of their native villages, which add to the experience.

To support sustainable riverine tourism, it is possible to manage the rivers by involving the local communities in the rural areas by tapping their local knowledge of safe navigation and traditional sustainable practices. Support towards this can be further enhanced by providing them with the necessary tools and education, empower them to manage their rivers for tourism and, at the same time, equipping our rural communities with a new role that can be income generating. Public-private partnerships could well be a modality of cooperation to allow for the opening of opportunities that can become sustainable economic activities for the rural people, working in partnership with commercial enterprises and government agencies.

In parallel, the authorities could provide facilities for good river transport like jetties, well-maintained navigable waterways with proper lighting and signage, and to enforce effective environmental management practices to attract investment in potential tourism areas. Rural riverine communities who depend heavily on the rivers as a sole means of access to basic amenities will benefit as well.

The SIWT project hopes to look for ways to revitalise and improve riverine tourism. Its not an easy task but stakeholders hope that the Master Plan that is developed through community and public participation will increase the likelihood that proposed improvements to facilities and services will reflect the needs of local people and ensure that development benefits are equitably shared and sustainable.



Resettled Penan women rely on handicraft sales for their livelihood.

Hedging Our River Commodities

By Sharon Ng



Hidden within Sarawak's rivers is a potential gold mine, a natural commodity that, if conserved and commercialised, could well be the state's next big industry.

In Japan, you can expect to pay RM72 per kg for bluefin tuna; in France, RM3,400 per kg for truffles; and, in Russia, up to RM17,000 per kg for Beluga caviar. Not only are these national delicacies to these respective countries, they are also million-dollar export commodities.

Sarawak's indigenous river fishes, unique and undervalued, have the potential to join this exclusive club, especially considering how much some would pay for their favourite fish. *Mata merah* (*Osteochilus melanopleura*), *Betutu* (*Oxyeleotris marmorata*) and *Mengalan* (*Puntius bulu*), for example, sell for RM30 to RM35 per kg. *Tapah* (*Wallago maculatus*) is priced at RM35 to RM40 per kg, while *Semah* (*Tor duoronensis*) and *Tengadak* (*Puntius schwanefeldii*) are RM100 and RM150 per kg, respectively. It is *Empurau* (*Tor tambroides*), however, that is the biggest catch at RM300 per kg.

Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Alfred Jabu, Deputy Chief Minister of Sarawak, is a passionate proponent of indigenous fishes. As the initiator of the Indigenous Fishery Research and Production Centre in Tarat and joint studies with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in Queensland, Australia, on the cultivation of the *Terubok* (*Tenualosa toil*), Jabu believes that the conservation of our natural resources and their environment is the key to the long-term commercial value of indigenous river fishes.

During a visit to the Department of Agriculture's facility at Tarat, which is one hour away from Kuching, Stephen Sungan, the officer in charge, took us on an enlightening tour. Set up in 1988 to check the declining wild fish population in Sarawak, the centre has, since 2001, collaborated in an R&D project with Deakin University, Australia, to develop the potential of the *Empurau* and *Semah*. In 2003, the research team achieved a breakthrough in the artificial breeding of captive *Empurau* and *Semah* from a



Above: Stephen Sungan showing successfully bred *Empurau* fish fry at the Tarat facility. Opposite: YB Datuk Patinggi Alfred Jabu, the political will behind indigenous fish research and conservation, releasing fish fry into Sungai Lemanak.



The *Tengadak* (above) and *Tapah* (below) are good sources of income and protein for the rural communities.

stock of about 1,000 wild fish collected since 1990 and produced its first generation of fry. The centre has since started a programme to breed *Empurau* and *Semah* for commercialisation.

In one of its ponds, Stephen showed us 100 adult *Empurau*, including two that weighed over 20kgs each. It amused my SRB colleague Marazuki Zahwi that one fish could potentially be valued at RM6,000, a sum equivalent to the down payment of his new car.

It is not as simple as digging a pond, put in fish fry, feed and manage them diligently and wait three years to harvest the cash crop. The *Empurau* and *Semah* require clear, swift-running waters and stony-bottomed streams usually found at the upper reaches of rivers. Their natural foods comprise fruits of trees that grow along the river banks, such as *Ensurai* (*Dipterocarpus oblongilofolius*), *Kelampu* (*sandorium koetjape*) and *Ara* (*nobilis camanensis*), as well as aquatic invertebrates. Thus the retention of riparian trees is ecologically important.

Many fish connoisseurs will only pay top dollar for specific *Empurau*. As in the bluefin tuna industry, a wild bluefin will fetch up to five times the price of a cultured bluefin. The white *Empurau* has a higher value than the red and the best size is around two kgs. Fish from Kapit or the upper Limbang and Baram fetch higher prices, while those from other areas can go as low as RM60 per kg.

Sarawak's indigenous riverine fishes are not just valuable commercially but are also important to the livelihoods of the rural communities, who rely on river fish as a cheap source of protein and essential nutrients. However, for sustainable development, there is a need to educate the rural communities to practise restraint so that immature and spawning fish are not caught.

Like many others, Stephen believes that our riverine fish resources should be revalued before it is too late. He also believes that, aside from research into captive breeding, conservation of the fishes' natural habitat and spawning grounds is essential. He had worked on a programme where seven areas had been identified for conservation. On 1st March 2000, the Tapah Conservation Area (2,770 hectares) at Sungai Meluang in Bintulu Division was gazetted under the Sarawak Fisheries Ordinance 2000. This area is well-known as a natural

spawning ground for the *Tapah*, which can grow up to 1.8m in length and 45kgs in weight.

In all these aspects — research for commercialisation, conservation of natural habitats and education of the rural communities — political will is critical. The relevant authorities and agencies have equally important roles to play through prudent planning of large-scale land-based projects, taking into consideration the “ecosystem approach” to safeguard our indigenous fisheries and to minimise, if not prevent, further degradation of the aquatic environment.

A two kg *Empurau* breeder, worth its weight in gold.



Activating the Rivers, Activating the Local Communities

By Sharon Ng



The sight of 15 bamboo rafts, 60 rafters in bright orange life-jackets, marshals calling out instructions and the entire longhouse community standing by was a jarring contrast from the usual tranquil early morning scene at Rumah Juan, Sungai Lemanak during an event organised to “activate” our rivers and communities.

The moment the Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) Chairman, Dr Stephen Rundi, approved the proposal for the Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport (SIWT) System Study project launch and raft race, you could almost feel a tangible buzz in the air as everyone at SRB was mobilised into action. The Resident of Sri Aman, Abang Samsuddin, and the Lubok Antu District Officer, Masir Kujat, had to be informed as they would play a critical role in organising the local authorities to handle the logistics, protocol for the VIP guest and cleanliness of the launch site. The cooperation of the longhouse communities of Rumah Juan and Rumah Saong on Sungai Lemanak was also essential in the preparation of the food and cultural experience for the guests and the construction of the rafts. As the launch was to be officiated by Sarawak’s Deputy Chief Minister, Datuk Patinggi Tan Sri (Dr) Alfred Jabu, who is also Minister of Infrastructure Development & Communications, with up to 500 expected guests, it was going to be a fairly big function for the community.

The decision to launch the project at Sungai Lemanak was to ensure that the event would have maximum participation from the rural community and, in conjunction with the launch, a raft race for the project’s public and private sector stakeholders, tourists and local community was also organised. This was to be an exercise in team building, an opportunity to experience the lifestyle of a traditional longhouse and understand the

Opposite: Early morning mist along Sungai Lemanak, where 60 rafters prepare for a raft race.
Bottom: Local longhouse community teams competing for first place.





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..... their expert knowledge of the rivers and the support of all members of the community, from the women who cooked the food, to the men and children who manned the longboats.





Headman of Rumah Juan conducting the traditional *Miring* ceremony.

necessity for inland water transport in a remote area not serviced by roads. Twenty-two longboats were hired to take all the guest and press, camera equipment, drinking water and supplies from Ngemah Kesit, where the road ended, to Rumah Juan.

We spent an eventful night at Rumah Juan, where everyone enjoyed the warm hospitality of the longhouse, the evening's *mandi sungai* (river bath) and barbeque on the *kerangan* (shingled beach of a river) and dancing till the early hours of the morning. But the memory that really stays in my mind is waking up at five in the morning, being offered some *tuak* (local rice wine) for good luck even before a cup of coffee, then staggering down to the river to be greeted by an explosion of colour and activity along the riverbank.

The jarring orange of 60 people in life-jackets and the river alive with activity against the backdrop of a misty river and forested hills was definitely a picture-postcard moment. Aside from the rafters, the local medical team, police and marshals led by SRB's Assistant Controller Christopher Chan were stationed in their longboats and looking relaxed, as escorting 15 rafts was literally a "walk in the park" compared to the much more demanding international event, the annual Kuching Regatta.

As the 15 bamboo rafts were hauled down to the water's edge, I felt a sense of nostalgia, remembering how I used to string bits of wood together and paddle along the river on my father's farm. Naturally, the rafts made by the local community were hardier, built from cultivated bamboo that would be recycled after the race to make chicken coops, fencing or used to patch up broken verandas. You will find that nothing is wasted in these rural communities.

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or to cry when we discovered that some of our rafts were sinking even before the race started. Built to local longhouse specifications only a week before, they couldn't support

the teams with bigger participants. In the end, only three participants could board each raft with one member as a reserve. A lesson in raft construction – always give your bamboo a month to dry so that it isn't so heavy.

In order not to disadvantage our urban rafters, most of whom had never been on a bamboo raft before, let alone paddled down a river for two hours, the competition was divided into two categories: local community and amateur. You could see the excitement and anticipation of the amateurs and the calm determination of the more "professional" local community as this would be a competition between the longhouses of the area.

When the air horn signalled the start of the race, you could hear the women and children shouting encouragement on the banks. But as much as we want to encourage activities on the river, I also hoped that, as the teams paddled down the river, they would be able to enjoy the beautiful environment of the Lemanak as the early morning sunlight filtered through the canopy of trees.

At the end of the day, it didn't really matter who won the raft race. It was an exciting experience for all, especially our visitors from overseas, Justine, Sebastian, Kobus, Michaela, and Hennie, guests of Don and Marina at the Singgahsana Lodge. In Sarawak for the first time, they never expected to be part of a river raft race during their visit. And you have to admire the determination of Sebastian and crew, who spent almost three hours on their raft before it snagged on a fallen branch and broke in half.

As for the SRB and UNDP officers, we learnt that day that when it comes to any activities on the rural rivers, as well-equipped and technically advanced we are, no event would be a success without the communal efforts of the longhouse people, their expert knowledge of the rivers and the support of all members of the community, from the women who cooked the food, to the men and children who manned the longboats. We recognise that to activate our rivers and tap on the potential tourism opportunities, we need to activate our local communities.

Top: Local Iban women watching the raft race; Bottom: Michaela learning the traditional Iban *ngajat*.



Rivers that Give, Rivers that Take

By Hazizan Sapiee & Sharon Ng

The river can provide the communities that live by it food, water and a means of transportation. However, rivers also have a darker side for those who take them for granted.

Fisherman along Batang Kemena cleaning up as the evening sun sets.



Historically, floods are common in Malaysia, with flood-prone areas covering about 9% of the total land area and directly affecting 22% of the population. The Department of Irrigation and Drainage (DID) reported in 2003 that floods cost the country an excess of RM3 billion a year.

The state of Sarawak is bisected by rivers. Almost every major town — Kuching, Sibul, Kapit, Sarikei, Bintulu, Mukah and Limbang — is located along riverbanks.

In many rural river communities in Sarawak, flooding is common, part of the yearly cycle of life by the rivers. However, the frequency and intensity of floods are now unpredictable, increasing the danger as their homes and schools are vulnerable to currents, tidal changes, slope failures and landslides along the riverbanks. Here, accessibility to clinics and hospitals and the cost and logistical difficulties in deploying rescue services may mean that aid may take a while to arrive in times of emergency.

An estimated 600,000 people, many of whom live in rural isolated communities, rely on the rivers of Sarawak as a means of transportation to go to school, the clinic, to their farms or to town. In addition, the rivers have also been generous, a source of protein and livelihood for many. For the past three years, there has been a strange phenomenon in Sungai Limbang, where hundreds of fish float to the surface of the river and can be scooped up by the buckets, giving the local communities an unexpected bounty.

However, the rivers also take lives. The Sarawak Rivers Board's records show that, from 2000 to 2007, there were a total of 68 reported river accidents and 61 fatalities.

In communities where their everyday lives are built around the rivers, there is a certain sense of complacency, a situation where people are comfortable with the rivers and tend to take safety for granted. However, this belief can kill, as rivers are unpredictable, with strong currents, undertows, extreme level changes and uncertain bottom depths.

Early in the morning in August 2004, five family members were crossing the Limbang when their *sampan* capsized. Two drowned. The family used the river every day but never wore life-jackets. It was reported that there were strong winds and heavy rain when they were crossing.

In another incident in December 2006, also in the Limbang, an eight-year-old boy fell into the river, was swept away and drowned. He was believed to be playing alone by the jetty.

The latest incident happened in April 2007, involving three friends. That day, the river took two lives,



Above: Children competing in the River Challenge, competitive games designed to improve skills in river rescue, CPR & first aid; Below: Many riverine communities are vulnerable to the impact of floods that are increasing in frequency with climate change.



"Schools are constantly inundated and the children are unable to use the playing fields, which are muddy and waterlogged, so their play areas are the boardwalks raised two metres off the ground."

– Alphonsus Akee
School Headmaster

both 25 years old, when their boat capsized under a barge on the way home after a fun day fishing for prawns. In his statement, the survivor said that, just before the incident, his friend told him, "I'm very happy today and very satisfied," but, the next moment, he was struggling for his life. He remembered being the first to reach the ladder by the riverbank but was pulled under by his struggling friends and even stepped on in their panic. He considered it a miracle that he managed to struggle up, take a breath and save himself.

In just three years, the Limbang had taken five lives. The first and latest incidents involved boats overturning – in both situations, not one person involved took the simple precaution of wearing a life-jacket.

Recognising the need for safety training among the river communities, the Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are promoting that safety on Sarawak's rivers should begin at home and in the schools and to cultivate a culture of "Your Own Safety First". This message was emphasised during a Seminar and River Challenge organised at Kampung Teh, Mukah.

The event was supported and officiated by the Chief Minister of Sarawak, YAB Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud, who said that "although fatality figures on the rivers are not alarming, security and safety of those who utilise rivers are not only the duty and responsibility of the government. The actual people who can prevent accidents are the river users themselves. We must think of safety first at all times."

Many communities in Mukah along the Igan, Oyan, Lassa and Mukah rivers, who use river transport daily, are vulnerable to the impact of floods during the *landas* (local word for monsoon) season. Alphonsus Akee, a school headmaster, highlighted the difficulties faced by the river communities and said that his



Along the Batang Oya during the *landas* season, floodwaters often rise above the school boardwalks designed two metres off the ground.

school is constantly inundated. The children are unable to use the playing fields, which are muddy and waterlogged, so their play areas are the boardwalks raised two metres off the ground. Even though the buildings are raised, the flood waters still seep in, sometimes as high as one metre above the floor boards.

He felt that school-going children will benefit from the ongoing river safety programme organised by UNDP and SRB. His students enjoyed the River Challenge, competitive games designed to improve their skills in river rescue, CPR and first aid. The kids were confident during the training and he felt that teachers should also be trained so that they can follow up and practise at their schools. It is important the people are sensitive about safety on the rivers.

River Voices

By Lilei Chow

"This is what I dream of a clean Sarawak River, full of fishes and other species. But its my dream!!! I just hope it will come true."

– Hurairah Saleem
SK St Thomas, Kuching



In Sarawak, there is a saying that everyone lives downstream of a river. A classroom project is helping children explore the links between these important watersheds and their communities.

Journals from SK Uma Bawang, Ulu Baram – Top: Evelyn Puyang, Consolation Prize Winner; Middle left: Elizabeth Lahung, First Prize Winner; Middle right: Katherinena Louis, Second Prize Winner; Bottom left: Robert Ajang, Consolation Prize Winner; Bottom right: Jenny Ulau, Consolation Prize Winner.

Little Maxwelle Emang, an 11-year-old Kayan boy who lives by Sungai Baram, will tell you that, for his family, life without the river is unimaginable.

In the mornings, he follows his brother down to the riverbank. He watches his big brother put on his bright orange life-jacket and hop on to the boat that takes him to the village school.

In the evenings, his mother washes clothes along the rocks lining the river bank, while he bathes in the water with his siblings.

His father returns from the farms around sunset with the harvest of the day, which they all eagerly look forward to. His favourite food, he tells us, is *Tapah*, which the family eats steamed with dollops of chilly and garlic.

Maxwelle and his family are part of an estimated 600,000 Sarawakians who depend on the rivers each day to get to school, work, their farms and the market place. However, the state's river transportation infrastructure is still, in some cases, rudimentary.

In rural areas, for example, the longhouse communities do not have the means or the capacity to build proper jetties – the makeshift ones that are cobbled together rise and fall with the depths of the rivers.

Locally-made wooden boats are utilised for community water transport, but there is currently no mechanism to license these boats and they do not have proper safety records.

Middle right: Children at Uma Bawang school along Batang Baram drying their handmade recycled paper; Bottom: Maxwelle writes in his journal about his life by Sungai Baram. Maxwelle and his classmates were taught how to make their own recycled paper which they used to fashion journals.



Building the “Streets” of Tomorrow

“For generations, the rivers of Sarawak have been the lifeblood of its communities, providing sustenance, irrigation, transportation, and a source of income,” says Sharon Ng, town-planner turned development worker, who is currently working with children such as Maxwelle to capture the significance of the rivers for the communities who work, live and hope in their midst through a classroom project, titled, *Living By the Rivers*.

Working with the Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB), the state-wide body tasked with monitoring and managing the 55 major rivers in the state, Ng is part of a team from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that is supporting SRB to develop the rivers of Sarawak as an integral part of the state’s transportation system.

Titled the Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport (SIWT) Study, SRB in partnership with UNDP wants to identify ways to make river transportation better, safer and more cost-efficient so that people like Maxwelle and his family can get to school each morning.

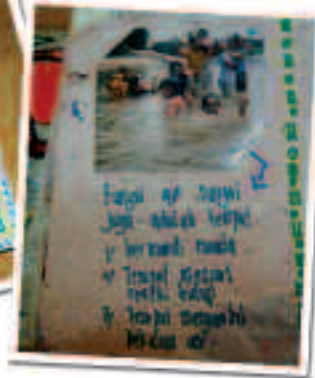
Making Safe and Smart Choices

Parallel to the technical study, the SIWT Study also contains an overarching education and awareness programme, where communities are being taught how to make safe and smart choices as they continue to rely on the rivers for their daily needs.

In July 2007, for example, the project team trained and certified school children and community leaders in Emergency First Response to curb casualties on the water.

The latest instalment is a River Cleanliness Programme, where the project team is visiting river communities around the state to raise awareness on preservation of the rivers.

The children explored how rivers have supported their communities, providing sustenance, irrigation, transportation and a source of income.



Through powerful visual images showcasing best examples from the world, the communities are being made to think, perhaps for the first time, the consequences of changing land use, pollution and waste.

As regulating cleanliness comes under the purview of SRB, Ng and her team are trying to encourage local communities to practice the “3Rs” (Reduce, Reuse and Recycle) by changing the way they look at and manage waste.

“I have seen people turn their backs on the rivers. They are throwing their rubbish into the rivers instead of taking care of them,” Maxwelle says, pointing upstream where logging camps have built their waste disposal sites along the riverbanks.

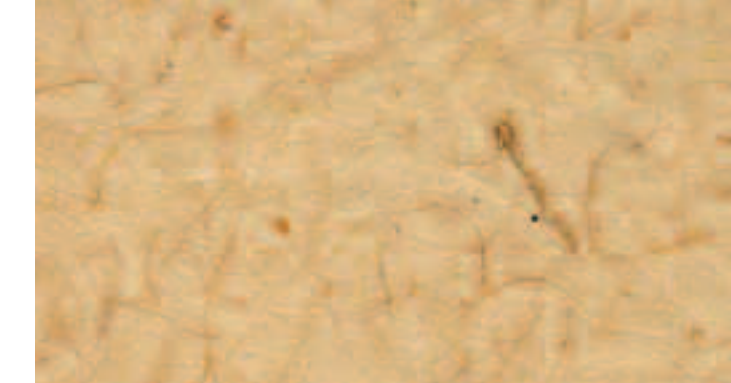
Armed with little box cameras and trusty 2B pencils, Maxwelle and 39 other students, comprising children from SK St Thomas in urban Kuching as well as SK Uma Bawang in Long Lama, are using photojournalism and creative writing to capture what daily life is by the rivers in their journals.

“Through their journals, the children will be given a voice to record their thoughts and feelings to reinforce the message about the importance of keeping these vital arteries healthy and safe,” says Ng.

The children’s journals will be exchanged at the end of the project and will provide a snapshot into the vastly different lives of urban and rural communities.

“Do you know that Kuching was named because of the *mata kucing* trees that grew along the banks of Sungai Sarawak? I hope to make a friend with someone from Kuching. I have never been there,” Maxwelle says.

With logging trails as the only road access, it is extremely difficult for Maxwelle and his family to get to other parts of the state, particularly when poor weather strikes, although small-scale inter-state flights and express boat services have made rural travel considerably easier in recent years.



Valerie Ng conducts the paper workshop where children decorate their journals using materials such as pressed flowers and leaves, while an elder of the community look on.



Journals from SK St Thomas, Kuching – Bottom right: Hurairah bin Saleem, First Prize Winner; Top right: Ron Goldfield, Second Prize Winner; Top: Shane Issac Rayong Consolation Prize Winner; Bottom left: Alvin Chong Consolation Prize Winner; Top left: Afkar Rabani Consolation Prize Winner. Opposite – Top: A municipal worker scooping up debris along Sungai Sarawak; Bottom: Children arriving at their school along the muddy banks of the Baram, where no landing facilities are available.



During the interactive workshops, Maxwelle and his classmates learnt how to make homemade recycled paper to fashion their own journals, decorating the books with dried leaves and pressed flowers.

Equally important, they were encouraged to learn about the history of their watershed through their communities' rich oral tradition and pen their emotions and ideas as well as use photos to tell a story.

"People's memories can be an important source of information about the changing ecology of a river through time," says Ng. "Interviewing the elders in the community will help the children understand the impact of human activity and how these rivers have helped support indigenous communities."

Creeping Social and Economic Inequalities

Travelling down the Baram, it is apparent that, as with the rest of Malaysia, the rivers have come under considerable environmental strain. Some of the environmental damage is a result of heavy logging activities that started in the 1980s and, more recently, massive clearing of forest cover for commercial plantation use. These activities have contributed to increased sedimentation of the rivers and erosion of the riverbanks.

Compounding the environmental threats is the growing urban-rural divide. According to the Sarawak Human Development Report 2006, the poverty rate for Sarawak stands at 7.5% compared to 21% in 1990. However, much of the wealth is concentrated in the urban cities such as Kuching and Miri. Many of the indigenous communities that inhabit the margins of the state's rivers and forests still live below the national poverty line.

Today, one in four Iban children, the largest of the indigenous groups, has never been to school. Many lack the education and vocational skills to lift themselves out of the "poverty trap."

Recognising the plight of Malaysia's indigenous communities, the government has stated in the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–2010 the need for measures to reduce income disparities through pro-poor policies and programmes.

"Access to basic healthcare, education and other amenities is vital in reducing poverty," says UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, Dr Richard Leete. "The SIWT Study will boost access and connectivity between urban and rural areas, while opening up new frontiers and opportunities for commerce and tourism."

Documenting Their Experiences

Despite the challenges of such an environment, the children involved in the project have participated in the journal exchange with much enthusiasm.

They have photographed everything from the banality of waiting for the boat carrying the week's sundries to the community, to moments of happiness playing along the muddy banks. They have captured their stark and simple homes and the beauty of community living.

Clearly, to these children, life on the river is not only a buzz of activity; it is also filled with love and affection, pictured in fleeting scenes amidst the repetitions of day to day life.

Maxwelle writes in his introduction that his hobby is playing badminton. "When I grow up, I hope to become a policeman. I hope you enjoy my pictures," he says. Seen through the eyes of a child, his writing is colourful and honest.

According to Ng, the workshops emphasised creativity, encouraging the children to compile their journals by exploration and experience, rather than relying on conventional pedagogy.

"They don't just learn the technical aspects of using a camera or writing an essay, but they are encouraged to discuss the issues they wish to present through their journals with the elders in their community. It is a process of self-development. Ultimately, we hope that this project will help to drive home the message that looking after the rivers is everyone's responsibility," she says.

The stories by the children will be compiled into a book to draw attention to these communities and to raise awareness about sustainable river management.

These stories are the voices of children like Maxwelle, who represent the fascinating river communities of Sarawak, each having its own values and mores, traditions and customs.

To these children, the rivers of Sarawak represent not only much of what they know and love today, but the pathway to a better life in the future.

