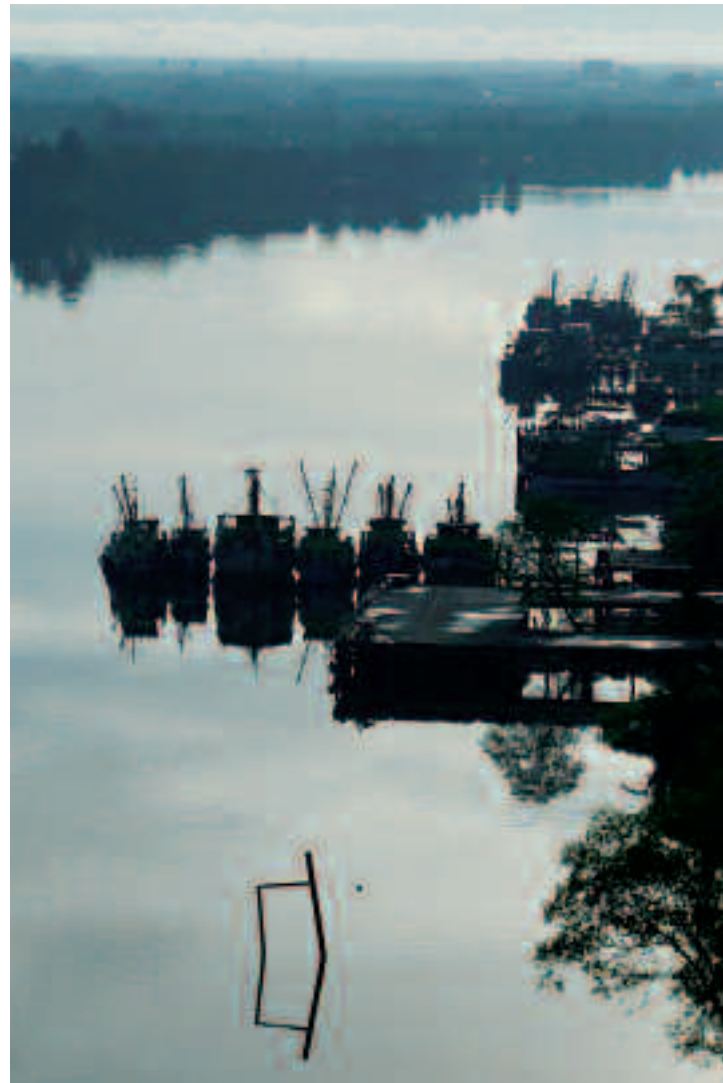


The Future of Sarawak's Rivers

By Muhamad Yakup bin Kari



Fishing boats at dawn along Sungai Sarawak.

“Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences; learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behaviour”

— Daudelin (1996,39)

Imagine that annually, almost 2.7 million commuters in Kuching city use the *penambangs* to cross the Sarawak River to go to work, school and the market, more than 1.5 million use the express boats to access towns like Kapit, Song and Sebuyau, where there is no road access and an estimated 600,000 people depend on community boats for transportation, many in the rural areas in Sarawak, whose population in 2006 is estimated at 2.4 million.

As we journey along the rivers of Sarawak, we catch a glimpse of life amongst the river communities, many who have never been asked their point of view, or given the opportunity to voice their opinions, shared their stories with us.

These are real people like 11-year-old Maxwelle Emang, who lives by Sungai Baram. The Baram, a 400-kilometre-long river in the Miri Division, is a historical one. It was here that the Baram Regatta was first staged in Marudi on 9th and 10th April 1899 to seal a peace pact among 20 tribes living along the river. The event drew about 6,000 spectators and featured, among others, a race by 16 war boats with 1,000 paddlers over a distance of 5.5 kilometres.

The Baram Regatta is still held every three years in Marudi, about 200 kilometres inland from Miri, and while Maxwelle might not be aware of the plans to make the regatta an international affair beginning 2008, he would definitely understand the significance of the river's role in the event.

After all, his and his entire family's lives revolve around the river. They depend on it as a source of food, a mode of transportation and, in the absence of piped water, for washing and bathing.

There are thousands of families who share the same intimate relationship with the river in Sarawak. Indeed, as some of the “River Gypsies” can attest, the river is their only way of life. Their homes float on the rivers, while their entire livelihoods depend on the rivers.

Sarawak's rivers are a social and cultural heritage, unique to Malaysia, which we must preserve.

— Dato' Dr Baharom bin Jani
Director of Infrastructure, EPU

Increasing government support for IWT. Dato' Dr Baharom (EPU) and Datuk Wan Kassim (MIDCOM) talking to a boat operator at Sibu Terminal.





Some of these “River Gypsies” operate *kapal bandung*, floating supermarkets that bring groceries and other essentials to rural communities where land transportation is either too expensive or even non-existent.

While these *kapal bandung* do help serve some needs of rural communities, there are other needs just as essential that requires fulfilling. One simple example concerns the civil servants working in the Daro. As there are no banks in the area, these civil servants need to travel to towns like Sibul or Sarikei to withdraw their salaries.

Some of these civil servants include teachers, who play a potentially crucial role in helping alleviate poverty among rural communities. The early spread of education in Sarawak, especially in the more inaccessible interiors, usually followed the way the rivers flowed. Even today, these rivers remain the easiest way for teachers to reach some schools, where they can contribute to the communities.

Apart from bringing teachers to schools in the interiors, rivers can also bring more facilities that will benefit the rural communities including mobile banks and libraries as well as healthcare. Furthermore, rivers can help generate power through the use of micro-hydro systems that can generate electricity with little financial and pollution costs.

The road to achieving the aims of the Master Plan formulated by the Sarawak Inland Waterway Transport System Study is a continuous one. It calls for the active participation of all – whether it be the communities who live by the rivers or the state and national governments that formulate policies that oversee the development and protection of the rivers.

For the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), effective implementation of the Master Plan will go a long way in ensuring that the Millennium Development Goals, a set of



eight key development targets set for 2015 and agreed to by the global community, are achieved in Malaysia, not just at the macro level, but in every town, district, village and longhouse in Malaysia.

These goals include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and creating a global partnership for development.

Opposite – Top: It only cost RM0.30 for Kuching commuters to use the *penambangs* to cross Sungai Sarawak; Bottom: Evening bath time for school children along Batang Baram where piped water is often not available. Below: Many Sarawakians’ lives revolve around the rivers, like these children playing along Sungai Kemena, Bintulu.



UNDP believes that, by addressing the major environmental threats to the rivers, the Masterplan will help reduce poverty in Sarawak, which is largely rural, in light of how dependent the communities are on this vital resource. Improving river transportation and accessibility between urban and rural areas also opens up doors of opportunity and choice for the poor.

Since its inception in 1993, the Sarawak Rivers Board has striven to fulfil its motto *Towards Safe, Clean and Natural Rivers*. Through the SIWT Masterplan, the Board hopes to continue striving to promote a culture of safety while on the river as well as protect and preserve Sarawak's interests in its assets and its environment.

Overall, this book has tried to emphasise the need to treat the rivers as an essential part of life. As mentioned earlier, pollution, erosion and human behaviour have contributed significantly to the deteriorating conditions of Sarawak's rivers. To improve the state of the rivers would, necessarily, depend on all the parties concerned – riverine communities, industry and government. All have a role to play to make the rivers safe and, thus, effective to the lives of all who, to some extent or other, depend on it.

Sarawak's rivers have the capacity to open up the state to the benefit of both its rural communities as well as the world outside. For the people of the interior, the rivers are a way of improving their lives as they will no longer be cut off from development. As for tourists, Sarawak's rivers are a "road" to another world, a natural one that is increasingly vanishing elsewhere.

As one of the least polluting modes of transportation available today, sustainable use of river transportation will put us on the pathway toward a low-carbon economy. Protecting our river basins, estuaries and surrounding rainforests, all of which underpin our way of life in Sarawak, will ensure our environment stays healthy for future generations.

The rivers are God-given infrastructure, yet funding is required for the construction of river facilities and maintenance. In 2006, the Federal Government implemented RM3.6 million (Eighth Malaysia Plan funding) worth of projects to improve river infrastructure such as wharfs, jetties and riverbanks, while in 2007, RM17 million was allocated (Ninth Malaysia Plan funding) for on-going projects that serve the river communities. We hope to see an increasing support for this vital resource, the rivers.



Rowers at the Regatta embody the spirit of many Sarawakians in their affinity with the rivers and the power to succeed.

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- 21 Courtesy of Sarawak Rivers Board. Pictures on Pages: 46, 145, 111(below).
- 22 Courtesy of UNDP. Picture on Page: 9, 117.
- 23 Courtesy of the Sarawak Information Department. Picture on Page: 6



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Glossary

<i>Ara</i>	<i>Nobilis camanensis</i>
<i>balik kampung</i>	homecoming or mass migration back to one's home, usually in conjunction with a festival
<i>Batang</i>	local usage for main river
<i>bebiau</i>	an Iban ritual, reciting a prayer while waving a fowl, to drive away bad things
<i>berjalai</i>	leaves home on a long journey
<i>Betutu</i>	<i>Oxyeleotris marmorata</i>
<i>Bujang Senang</i>	literally "Jolly Bachelor," this legendary man-eating giant white crocodile grew to 19 feet and four inches and made its home in the Batang Lupar, which flows through Sri Aman. Although it was killed in 1992 after a killing rampage, memories of the man-eater are still strong in the Batang Lupar area
<i>cupak</i>	measure of weight, approximately 675 grams
<i>engkabang</i>	<i>Shorea macrophylla</i>
<i>Empurau</i>	<i>Tor tambroides</i>
<i>Ensurai</i>	<i>Dipterocarpus oblongilofolius</i>
<i>Gawai</i>	harvest festival celebrated on 1st June
<i>Kelampu</i>	<i>Sandoriam koetjape</i>
<i>kerangan</i>	shingled beach of a river
<i>landas</i>	local word for monsoon
<i>mandi sungai</i>	river bath
<i>Mata merah</i>	<i>Osteochilus melanopleura</i>
<i>miring</i>	traditional Iban ceremony performed to appease the gods and the spirits and to seek blessings
<i>ngajat</i>	traditional Iban dance, believed to have been performed by warriors upon their return from battles
<i>penambang</i>	local river taxi, also known as tambang
<i>pua kumbu</i>	traditional woven tribal textile
<i>rumah</i>	local usage for longhouse
<i>sape'</i>	traditional lute
<i>Semah</i>	<i>Tor duoronensis</i>
<i>Tapah</i>	<i>Wallago maculatus</i>
<i>Tengadak</i>	<i>Puntius schwanefeldii</i>
<i>Terubok</i>	<i>Tenulosa toli</i>
<i>tuai rumah</i>	longhouse chief
<i>tuak</i>	local rice wine

Acknowledgements

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Sarawak Rivers Board (SRB) wish to thank...

Prime Minister's Office – Malaysia
 Chief Minister's Office – Sarawak
 Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department – Malaysia
 State Planning Unit, Chief Minister's Department – Sarawak
 Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Communications – Sarawak
 Ministry of Rural Development – Sarawak
 Ministry of Planning and Resource Management – Sarawak
 Ministry of Urban Development and Tourism – Sarawak
 Ministry of International Trade and Industry – Malaysia
 Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment – Malaysia
 Ministry of Tourism – Malaysia
 Ministry of Transport – Malaysia
 Public Works Department – Sarawak
 Land and Survey Department Sarawak
 Marine Department Sarawak
 Department of Environment Sarawak
 Department of Education – Sarawak
 Department of Agriculture – Sarawak
 Sarawak Health Department
 Sarawak Land Consolidation and Rehabilitation Authority (SALCRA)

Fire and Rescue Department – Sarawak
 Civil Defence Department – Malaysia (JPA 3)
 Information's Department – Malaysia
 Natural Resources and Environment Board – Sarawak
 Department of Museums – Malaysia
 All Residents and District Offices – Sarawak
 Principals and Headmasters of Schools that participated in the River Safety & Rescue Training – Sarawak
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 Bob Teoh, Traveler-writer, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
 Lynn Chew Sok Ling, Emergency First Response Instructor Trainer, Malaysia
 Valerie Ng, Paper Craft Workshop, Papier Private Limited, Singapore
 Alphonsus Akee, School Headmaster, Sarawak
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