Timber Organization's Backing 'One Step' Toward 'Peace Park' in Borneo

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An intergovernmental organization representing countries that produce the bulk of the world's timber has thrown its support behind a decade-long effort to protect the last remaining primary forest in the Malaysian state of Sarawak.

In its November 2020 meeting, the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO) endorsed a proposal by the Forest Department Sarawak (FDS) for what's been called the Baram Peace Park. The proposed park would cover 2,835 square kilometers (1,095 square miles) of northeastern Sarawak on the island of Borneo, incorporating a hodgepodge of undulating forests, past and current timber and oil palm concessions, and agricultural lands for the thousands of Indigenous people who live in the area.

> "The project objectives contribute strongly to ITTO's mandate to promote sustainable forest management in the tropics, including through empowering and engaging with local communities," the ITTO told Mongabay in a written statement.

Peter Kallang, chairman of the Malaysian NGO SAVE Rivers, said the ITTO's backing is "one step ahead after all the years of working on it." But he also acknowledged that the ITTO's stamp of approval did not mean that the park would come to fruition.

With the endorsement, the ITTO and the Sarawak state government will now search for other member countries to donate about 40% of the park's roughly $2 million price tag. The prospective donor or donors will likely be one of the 38 tropical timber-consuming countries that are also members of the ITTO. Kallang said Japan or Switzerland, which both purchase timber from Sarawak, could provide more than $800,000 for the project.

The balance of the financing would come from the state government.

Image on the right: Peter Kallang, chairman of SAVE Rivers, in the Upper Baram. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

"They have been quite open to us," Kallang said of FDS.

The former chief minister of Sarawak, Tan Sri Haji Adenan Satem, had been an ally of the park's proponents. But Adenan's death in 2017 has stretched the timeline for the park's formation, and questions remain about funding.

Without the commitment of funds from donors, the proposal "is unlikely to be implemented," FDS director Hamden Mohammad said in a statement, according to the newspaper *Dayak Daily*.

Hamden also said the government had never settled on the "Baram Peace Park" name. The proposal, which the forest department submitted to the ITTO, calls it the "Upper Baram Forest Area," named for the Baram River, a major conduit draining the rain-soaked forests of northern Sarawak and carrying that water out to the South China Sea.

Hamden did not respond to requests for an interview with Mongabay.

Kallang said "Baram Peace Park" was simply the most recognizable name for the area, the one that local Indigenous groups and international NGOs involved in the effort have used for years. The SAVE Rivers website notes that the name of the park "will ultimately be determined by the communities involved."

Logs from the Upper Baram ready for transport at a timber yard in northern Sarawak. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

‘Stop the chop’

In the past year, other hurdles have arisen, seeming to dim the park’s potential to safeguard Sarawak’s last patches of intact rainforest. In April 2020, the government approved a logging concession for Sarawak-based Samling Plywood that overlaps with the future park. Kallang said the logging threatens the “core area,” home to nearly 790 km2 (305 mi2) of relatively undisturbed forest. The concession also reportedly encroaches on slivers of the forest used by nearby Indigenous communities.

> “The communities are grateful for the support of the Upper Baram Forest Area,” said Komeok Joe, CEO of the Indigenous Penan organization KERUAN, according to the Dayak Daily. “However, despite the ITTO’s endorsement, Samling continues to extract timber within the area of the park.”

Samling did not respond to several requests for comment from Mongabay.

The proposed park area is home to the last remaining primary forest in Sarawak. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

SAVE Rivers and KERUAN, along with two international NGOs, the Borneo Project and the Bruno Manser Fund, said Samling hadn’t sought permission to harvest timber from the concessions from communities nearby — communities that these organizations and members themselves say rely on the resources found there: According to the NGOs, Indigenous groups like the Penan collect medicinal plants, harvest building materials, and hunt in the forests. And the free-flowing tributaries of the Baram are a vital source of water and generate electricity through micro-hydropower installations that don’t require damming streams or rivers. Industrial-scale logging, the likes of which have whittled away as much as 80% of Sarawak’s old-growth forests, could jeopardize all of that, says the coalition

supporting the Baram park.

> “If you really look,” Kallang said, “in fact, there is no forest in the Upper Baram left which is not being leased out for logging.”

In June 2020, the coalition started a petition to the Geneva-based Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). PEFC is the world’s largest sustainability certification organization by land area covered. In the petition, SAVE Rivers and its allies say that communities weren’t adequately consulted about the Samling concession.

The “stop the chop” petition argues that harvesting timber without communities’ consent should not be allowed under the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS). Companies must obtain certification to export Sarawak’s timber from Malaysia — a point reiterated by the U.S.-based Borneo Project’s Fiona McAlpine in a Mongabay commentary in July.

The Ba Balong River, a tributary of the Baram in northeastern Sarawak. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

Members of the communities affected by the timber licenses told the Borneo Project that they’ve registered complaints with Sarawak authorities. But the Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC), which is in charge of the certification scheme, responded in August that it had never received any “formal complaint.” The Borneo Project posted a subsequent response in September, saying that community members did not know a formal mechanism existed for submitting complaints.

The MTCC also contended that the petition confused the process for issuing concessions in Sarawak.

> “The ‘Stop the Chop’ petition against MTCC was misdirected as it gave the allusion that such license or permit was approved by MTCC which was incorrect,” Siti Syaliza Mustapha, senior manager for the Forest Management Certification Unit in MTCC, told Mongabay in an email. “The decision to grant the legal right of managing the forest in accordance with the state’s land-use planning is the sole prerogative of the Sarawak State Government.”

Still, Syaliza added that the MTCC takes complaints about certification “very seriously and it is our key endeavour to ensure the highest standards of sustainable forest management are maintained by all forest managers who have voluntarily agreed to abide by these standards through certification.”

She also said the MTCC had participated in several meetings with SAVE Rivers and the Switzerland-based Bruno Manser Fund in the fall of 2020 “to address the issues and concerns” and “obtain mutual understanding on the issues raised and how PEFC and MTCC could provide further support to their plights.”

A rice paddy surrounded by forest in the Upper Baram. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

Mapping out conservation

The idea of a park in the Upper Baram began in the 2000s with the Penan people. As they watched the tide of industrial logging lapping ever closer to their communities and surrounding forests, they sought a way to protect the forest they depend on. Over the years, KERUAN and the Penan partnered with SAVE Rivers, the Bruno Manser Fund and the Borneo Project, as well as other Indigenous communities and government agencies.

In 2016, they stopped the construction of a hydropower dam that would have flooded low-lying forests and displaced communities. That same year, they created the Baram Conservation Initiative not only to support the formation of the Baram Peace Park, but also to secure land rights and find new ways to encourage economic development that don’t

involve the destruction of the forest.

By 2017, 63 Penan communities, supported by KERUAN and the Bruno Manser Fund, had plotted out the locations of critical hunting areas and sources of food like the sago palm, of rivers and hillsides, and of culturally important burial grounds and past settlements, on a set of 26 maps. The maps were developed over more than a decade to serve as a record for the Penan communities.

> "The Penan, more than any other community here in Sarawak … are really working hard on conserving the area because their livelihood is threatened," Kallang said. "They have this mapping to use as one of the bullets … to fight in the struggle."

A hand-drawn map by the Penan. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

Eighteen of those Penan communities would fall inside the park's boundaries. Other Indigenous communities, including the Kenyah, Kelabit and Saban, would also lie within its borders.

Kallang also said that keeping the core areas of forest untouched was critical to encouraging the resurgence of wildlife in the region. In "a stepping stone toward the Baram Peace Park," the Borneo Project has been working with technicians from Indigenous communities in and around the proposed park to catalog the species living in the Upper Baram and gather information on land use as part of the Baram Heritage Survey.

Around half of the 2,835 km2 earmarked for the park is degraded land, and another quarter or so is farmland. Still, in a recent video update of the ongoing work shared by the Borneo Project, participants in the survey said they had found hornbills, gibbons, sun bears,

pangolins, and tiny deer known as muntjacs in the proposed area.

KERUAN CEO Komeok Joe, center, celebrates the completion of the maps of the Penan homeland in 2017. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

Kallang envisions the park serving as a corridor running through the remaining high-quality forest in the heart of Borneo and connecting Pulong Tau National Park in Sarawak with Kayan Mentarang National Park in the Indonesian province of North Kalimantan. The gargantuan Kayan Mentarang covers more than 10,000 km2 (3,900 mi2) — more than three times the size of Yosemite in the U.S. It reportedly teems with wildlife, including the critically endangered Bornean orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*). Kallang said he hopes the park might just facilitate the return of orangutans into this part of Sarawak.

Working toward these goals has been a long struggle, and Kallang said he knows it's not over yet. He said he remains hopeful, though when he spoke with Mongabay in 2017, he admitted that at times he's not always sure such efforts will succeed.

"I wouldn't be human if I didn't," Kallang said at the time.

Doubts aside, though, support from the ITTO means that, three years later, a park in Sarawak's Upper Baram is "one step" closer to becoming a reality.

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Featured image: Three peaks jut from the forest within the boundaries of the proposed park. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

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