

With Guest editors | Bas Verschuuren and Robert Wild

Langscape

Sacred Natural Sites;
Sources of Biocultural Diversity



Langscape is an extension of the voice of Terralingua. It supports our mission by educating the minds and hearts about the importance and value of biocultural diversity. We aim to promote a paradigm shift by illustrating biocultural diversity through scientific and traditional knowledge, within an elegant sensory context of articles, stories and art.



On the cover: Wixárika yarn paintings often depict the interconnection of the spiritual and natural world. The Wixárika Mara'akame pictured here (in ceremonial clothing), calls upon the eagle spirit under the watchful eye of the sun and the moon. Source: Yarn painting by Gonzalo Hernandez, courtesy of the Huchol Center for Cultural Survival. <http://www.thehuicholcenter.org>

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Story and Photographs by Inanc Tekguc

Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran

(Return to the Big Name)



Tialam Doronsoi, a 77-year-old Dusun lady walking from Bundu Tuhan to her neighboring village in the early morning. Mt. Kinabalu towers over the surrounding landscape.

Through dialogue with park officials, finally an agreement was reached to give the neighboring Dusun free access to the mountain for one day in December 2010. With great joy, people from the villages of Bundu Tuhan and Kiau came together to organize what they called Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran (Return to the Big Name), their sacred pilgrimage to Mt. Kinabalu.

Strangely, before I was in a car heading in its direction, all I knew about Mt. Kinabalu was that it had some significance for the Dusun people living nearby.

We set out from Kota Kinabalu, the bustling seaside capital of Malaysia's Bornean state of Sabah. Our 90-kilometer route took a turn to the east and we started our steady ascent toward Bundu Tuhan, a cluster of Dusun villages at the foothills of Mt. Kinabalu with an altitude of around 1500m. The mesmerizing green colors of the hill dipterocarp and lower montane forests carpeted the hillsides on either side of the road. I would learn later that before this road was built the bigger challenge faced by early western scientists was not to climb the mountain per se, but more so the difficult terrain to get to the foot of it with all their supplies.

As our car serpented around the hills, Agnes told me about the work of the Global Diversity Foundation (GDF) in Sabah. An international non-governmental organization, GDF works with several communities bordering the Crocker Range Park and Kinabalu Park. One of their aims is to empower indigenous people by enabling them to plan and carry out community-based research and document their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK).

Along with her colleague Adam, they have been training several young members of the local Dusun people in a variety of ethnobiological and

participatory action research methods, who in turn work closely with their communities. The emergent team of Dusun community researchers has not only carried out field research with their communities, they also engage in constructive dialogue with government agencies, international organizations and academics.

Historically, Mt. Kinabalu has been a very important resource for the Dusun for their daily subsistence of food, medicine and forest products. Mt. Kinabalu is among the highest species diversity centers in the world, with more than 5,000 species within an area of 1600 km². As a result of the mountain being one of the youngest mountains in the world, the flora of Mt. Kinabalu includes apparently neo-endemic species in large numbers, (Martin *et al.*, 2002).



Community members wait at the starting point in Kinabalu Park to start their climb of Mt. Kinabalu, during Kakakapan 2011.



One employment option for the indigenous Dusun communities is to work as porters on Mt. Kinabalu, which is a very physically demanding job.



Nepenthes flower, also known as the pitcher plant, is among the botanical attractions of Mt. Kinabalu.

Beyond the biological significance, however, Mt. Kinabalu has another major role in Dusun lives, at a spiritual level. Since time immemorial, it has been the sacred place where the Dusun believe their deceased rest before they finalize their journey to *Libabou*, the eternal resting place (Martin *et al.*, 2002). When someone passes away, the body is buried facing the mountain, so when the spirit awakens it can find its way easily. The Dusun revere the mountain so much that, out of respect, they do not use its name and instead call it *Gayo Ngaran* (the Big Name). In toto, Mt. Kinabalu occupies a prominent meaning in what it means to be a Dusun.

The high biodiversity of the mountain made it important also for the Malaysian government and the world at large. Mt. Kinabalu and the surrounding area were gazetted in 1964 as Kinabalu National Park, which later was categorized as Type II under IUCN categories for protected areas. Then, in 2000, UNESCO declared the mountain as Malaysia's first World Heritage Site.

From a strictly conservationist point of view, the designation of Mt. Kinabalu as a protected area might be

seen as a way to secure the area from exploitation. While exploitation is a serious threat to the biodiversity, it is also argued that biodiversity in environments of sacred sites is likely to have survived under sustainable use by the indigenous people because of their importance (Thorley and Gunn, 2008). Mt. Kinabalu has been, for many centuries, a central aspect of Dusun cosmology as a sacred place. Their reverence and their extensive knowledge about its ecosystem have resulted in the conservation of Kinabalu area for centuries prior to any state-driven initiatives.

For example, the Dusun along the Papar River have been customarily applying what they call the *tagal* concept for conserving river resources. They designate no-fishing zones and even feed the fish in certain locations to keep the species population steady. Similarly, Bundu Tuhan community is extending the *tagal* concept to conserve their forests as well.

Unfortunately, existing community-based conservation methods were overlooked and with the declaration of the park, the uninhibited access of the



The South Peak seen from the summit shortly after the sunrise. Some people on the left already going down, while others still climbing up.

Dusun people to this sacred place was severed. The mountain slowly became a hotspot for about 50,000 wealthier local and foreign tourists who climb the mountain each year. The rising prices of access to the mountain have made it more than a luxury for most of the Dusun people except for those who are employed by the park, mostly as porters or guides.

The background information from Agnes made me impatient to see this sacred place. Finally, as we turned another bend she announced the symbolic landmark of Sabah. The sun had set and it was getting dark. What I thought, at first, to be the growing darkness to my left was a steeply ascending wall of forest. My head tilted upwards, leaving my lower jaw where it was with my mouth open in awe. My eyes followed the towering massif up toward the granite top, stopping for a moment on the waterfall cascading down the southwestern slopes. I was staring at the tallest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea, with its highest point at about 4100m above sea level. Its rapid ascent was equally impressive; just looking at it reminded me of how little I was in

comparison to the forces of nature. I doubted that my experience of “seeing” Mt. Kinabalu would be the same if I did not learn what I did from Agnes and from the local Dusun in the following days.

Over the days that I stayed in Bundu Tuhan and in other Dusun villages, I had the chance of a glimpse into Dusun worldview and how much their lives are interconnected with nature. Having lost their access to the mountain, Dusun elders have grown increasingly worried that this lack of access was a factor for erosion of traditional values and knowledge amongst the younger generation, which they seemed eager to revive. They had tried to find ways to conserve the knowledge and values.

Since the 1990s, the Dusun living around the park have demonstrated the depth of their traditional ecological knowledge through participatory research in collaboration with park personnel and expert researchers. With the help of GDF, Dusun of Bundu Tuhan have started to document their traditional ecological knowledge and conservation practices in an organized way. They constructed a scaled 3D map of their customary



A GDF community researcher feeds the fish in the protected part of the Papar river under “tagal” system, a community-based conservation practice.



Dusun elders transfer their ecological knowledge onto a 3D modeling map prepared by GDF community researchers.



Two groups compete over a photo puzzle during a workshop organized by GDF community researchers that emphasizes the awareness of biocultural diversity in the region.

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territories adjacent to the park. As a community, they worked together to mark on the map their ecological practices within designated zones.

They shared their results with park authorities to show that the repository of their ancestral knowledge, accumulated over generations, has maintained their local environment and that what might seem like random land management practices, in fact, have deep roots based on experience going back centuries. Most importantly, they emphasized that access to Mt. Kinabalu is crucial for the continuation of their traditions. Through dialogue with park officials, finally an agreement was reached to give the neighboring Dusun free access to the mountain for one day in December 2010.

With great joy, people from the villages of Bundu Tuhan and Kiau came together to organize what they called *Kakakapan id Gayo Ngaran (Return to the Big Name)*, their sacred pilgrimage to Mt. Kinabalu. In accordance with their traditions, the elders performed the *monolob* ritual, a propitiatory ceremony to seek safe passage before climbing the mountain.

The team of Dusun community researchers recorded important moments of the inaugural event with their video cameras. A Dusun elder reflected his joy in an interview: “*When the Park authorities agreed to permit the community to climb the mountain for one time, we were very happy.*” A younger Dusun expressed his hopes for the future “*I hope for the communities of Kiau and Bundu Tuhan that this program continues every year.*” (An edited version of the video recordings can be watched at the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-huqQH2k2j4>.)

The pilgrimage was repeated in 2011, coinciding with my visit to Bundu Tuhan. I participated in the Kakakapan event and later had the chance to climb the mountain too. Although it was a brief encounter both with the Dusun and Mt. Kinabalu, my experience of “seeing Mt. Kinabalu” was far deeper than it would be, if I were just a tourist chasing a World Heritage Site whose beautiful pictures I



Grandmother of one of the Dusun community researchers walking in the forest.

saw on some magazines.

I like to think, if it were not for these communities venerating Kinabalu, the Malaysian government would not find a mountain to turn into a protected park. Likewise, the people of Bundu Tuhan would not be who they are, without Mt. Kinabalu being in their lives. Their fate seems to be intertwined, perhaps represented in the term “biocultural.” I am glad to see increasing Dusun involvement in the conservation efforts for the area. After all, the wealth of our world is not just biodiversity, rather *biocultural diversity*. 🌿

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