

Penan's pristine forests



Logging roads have opened up the forests of central Borneo, inviting shooters from around the region to hunt the wildlife.

Photos: PAUL MALONE

testify to their birth. Finding the money to get a certificate can also be a problem. Making a two or three-day trip to Long Lama or Marudi to apply for documents, and then having to come down again to collect them, is an issue when transport costs are RM1000 (\$A318) per person and the people have next to no cash income.

In addition, there are cases where Penan coming down to collect their documents have been asked to pay a late collection penalty before being given their identity cards.

Paperwork or no paperwork, it cannot be denied that the Penan have been, and are occupiers of, a number of regions of Sarawak, including the upper Baram and Limbang river regions.

The Sarawak Government risks looking ridiculous – or even worse, racist – by denying the existence of one of its native peoples.

The Penan can also demonstrate their presence by showing grave sites and they have no hesitation in pointing out the long standing boundaries of their lands.

I trekked for three days through the Long Lellang to Long Kerong region. My guide pointed to the clear marker of crossed poles on a ridge that delineated the Long Lellang Penan territory from Long Selungo River Penan territory (once led by the now-deceased Kelesau Naan, a key signatory to the High Court land rights claim).

At Long Benalih, Henneson Bujang pointed to the ridge that marked the limits of his community's land and carefully extracted a map from a PVC pipe to confirm his claim. Using GPS mapmakers, Robert Jengan, Stanley Rolland and Dennis Adun produced the document on April 11, 2001.

But this may not count for much with the Sarawak Government. In opposing the Penan's High Court claim, it resects maps "drawn or produced by a foreign source".

Apparently the work of the Directorate of Overseas Surveys is not good enough for them.

The lack of paperwork also affects the Penan's political impact.

In recent elections at the Long Lellang polling booth, 65 votes were recorded, with 60 for the Government.

Coincidentally only five Penan were registered to vote, even though the booth is in the centre of a Penan-dominated region.

With the controversial death of community leader Kelesau Naan last year, a little of the spirit of resistance to logging has been washed away.

There are still determined young Penan. But the High Court case is stayed for who knows how long, providing little inspiration for those trying to hold the line.

Samling's shareholders can afford to wait. The company has other concessions to keep it busy.

"I think this has been twisted. Helping people does not mean corruption. Corruption is something else. This is assisting them, helping them to have better lives. How can this be called corruption?"

The Penan are poor and live in remote locations with little access to means of communication. Their young are tempted by all the glitter the developed world offers on the satellite television, even if they do not yet have the skills and education to enable them to compete in the wider world to get the goods.

Across the community, among those strongly opposed to logging and those who accept it as inevitable, there is strong support for education.

Parents send their children off to boarding school but miss them dearly and will walk for three days through the jungle to be there on the first day of a two-week holiday break.

They will then walk them home, taking five days, and spend four days at home before walking their children back.

Here Samling offers help.

Logging roads have a side benefit and the company can, and

does, offer lifts in its four wheel drives, cutting the travelling time each way.

The fit and healthy Penan adults labour long and hard to eke out a subsistence lifestyle. Old couples still walk into the jungle to gather food or tend the small rice paddies they have carved out. The very old stoke the fires and mind the babies and toddlers. There is peace and quiet, little or no violence, drunkenness, drug abuse or obesity in the villages at present.

But there are signs that along with the benefits of development, the vices are on their way. Penan men now go to the Long Suit Kenyah trading post to drink and there are allegations that logging workers have taken young Penan girls from the Long San boarding school at night, ostensibly to watch television.

The villages are not a paradise, as one Swiss tourist claimed when I met her at Long Kerong.

"Oh yes," I said, "with the mosquitoes and the leeches."

I could have added "with no doctor or nurse at the health clinic, no medicine and children having to leave home to go to school".

Walking long distances in the jungle is not always fun, even for the Penan. There is no real shelter from the torrential rain. Leeches suck the blood and leave an itch that lasts for days. The trails are hard going and Penan people can die in the jungle, just like anyone else.

One man fell to his death off a slippery long crossing a few years back. They are extraordinarily tough people, but they are not super-human.

It is too much to ask of a people hard pressed to find the money to travel to the nearest major town to register a birth or get an identity card, let alone mount a campaign to save the last of the Sarawak's major virgin forests.

Without sustained high pressure from outside governments and authorities, backed by significant financial resources, the last of the great forests of Sarawak will be mined for their mammoth trees and the panther that today stalks the foothills of Long Lellang will be no more.