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PLUNDERING THE BARAM PEACE PARK



How the Sarawak government and International Tropical Timber Organization buried an Indigenous conservation initiative in Malaysian Borneo – and let a major logging operation take its place.

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About the Bruno Manser Fonds: The Bruno Manser Fonds strives for the protection of tropical rainforests and for the respect of the rights of the peoples of the rainforest.

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The Premier of Sarawak, Abang Johari, and timber tycoon Hii King Chiong, owner and director of Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd. at a public event in Miri, Sarawak:
Office of The Premier of Sarawak 2024

Forest Department Sarawak (FDS) Director Mohammad Hamden and ITTO Executive Director Sheam Satkuru at signing ceremony for UBFA project:

ITTO. 21 March 2023. "Newly launched projects in Sarawak's Upper Baram will boost local livelihoods and conserve biodiversity."

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Borneoland Timber Resources Logging Camp in Ba Data Bila, Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia:
Bruno Manser Fonds and Keruan

Satellite image of logging operations in Ba Data Bila (SPOT 6, 20 April 2025).

Community protest against logging in Upper Baram (August 2024):
Bruno Manser Fonds and Keruan

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List of Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BMF	Bruno Manser Fonds
FDS	Forest Department Sarawak
FMU	Forest Management Unit
FOMISS	Forest Management Information System Sarawak
FPIC	Free, Prior, and Informed Consent
GM	General Manager
ITTC	International Tropical Timber Council
ITTO	International Tropical Timber Organization
MTCS	Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme
MYR	Malaysian Ringgit
NAPBHR	National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights
NCR	Native Customary Rights
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NTD	Native Territorial Domain
SLAPP	Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation
STLVS	Sarawak Timber Logging Verification System
SUHAKAM	Human Rights Commission of Malaysia
SUPP	Sarawak United Peoples' Party
UBFA	Upper Baram Forest Area
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USD	United States Dollar

Executive Summary

In the Upper Baram region of Sarawak, Malaysia, one of Borneo's last remaining primary rainforest landscapes is under threat from industrial logging. At the heart of this crisis is the ancestral forest of the Upper Baram's Indigenous peoples, where timber extraction resumed in 2024 despite plans to establish the Baram Peace Park, a community-led conservation area.

This report traces one of the biggest disappointments of Sarawak's Indigenous communities in recent times. Its contents are based on extensive ground reporting, community testimonies, photographic evidence, satellite analysis, and documentation of key events.

For decades, Indigenous communities in this region have resisted logging, successfully protecting large tracts of forest through sustained action. These efforts culminated in the Baram Peace Park vision, later formalized by the Sarawak government as the "Upper Baram Forest Area (UBFA)". This project was endorsed by the Malaysian government and the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO). The UBFA was meant to initiate a long-overdue shift from state-sanctioned commercial timber extraction to conservation and Indigenous governance. Instead, that promise was systematically dismantled – as this report documents.

While communities and NGOs were preparing to implement community-led conservation, the Sarawak government was quietly reshaping the UBFA behind closed doors. Instead of pursuing forest protection and Indigenous rights, government project leads shifted the focus to "sustainable management" of forests – logging under a different name. This effectively enabled continued extraction under a so-called conservation framework.

In early 2024, the Sarawak government granted a new timber concession to Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd., overlapping with more than 100,000 ha of the proposed UBFA conservation area, without public tender, transparency, or the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) of affected communities. Logging rapidly expanded into forests that communities understood to be protected, causing widespread ecological damage, including deforestation, river sedimentation, and the destruction of critical wildlife and livelihood resources. When communities and NGOs raised questions about this shift and the lack of transparency, the project was unilaterally cancelled by the state.

By failing to uphold transparency, accountability, and their stated commitments, the Sarawak government and the ITTO have left communities facing renewed forest loss, growing social divisions, coercive economic pressures, and limited avenues for redress. The Baram Peace Park case is more than a local dispute — it is a warning of how weak oversight and failures to uphold international standards can derail community-led conservation efforts.

Despite this, Baram's Indigenous communities continue to resist through blockades, legal action, and advocacy, demanding an immediate halt to logging, the cancellation of the timber license, the fulfillment of the Baram Peace Park commitments, and the permanent protection of their ancestral lands.

What is happening in the Upper Baram has implications that will reverberate far beyond Sarawak's borders for years to come, amid the continued destruction of tropical forests the world cannot afford to lose. This report includes demands from communities and recommendations for policymakers to halt deforestation and permanently safeguard these forests for generations to come.

1980s

Start of large-scale logging in Sarawak

1990

Start of logging operation in the Sela'an area

1989–2008

Multiple protest actions and police reports against logging activities

November 2009

First idea of creating the Penan Peace Park

March 2010

Penan Peace Park meeting in Ba Data Bila

2010–2023

Community-based development of the Baram Peace Park project

13 November 2020

Approval of the Upper Baram Forest Area (former Baram Peace Park) project by ITTO

20 March 2023

Signing ceremony of the UBFA project



ITTO
INTERNATIONAL TROPICAL
TIMBER ORGANIZATION



19 April 2023

Forest Department Sarawak (FDS) says UBFA is not a conservation project

May 2023

First signs of Borneoland logging activities in Upper Baram – Penan blockade to stop the logging road construction

31 August 2023

Timber licence from Samling in UBFA area expires – UBFA communities not informed

12 March 2024

FDS secretly grants licence to Borneoland Timber Resources

09 July 2024

Logging starts in Penan community Ba Data Bila

10 July 2024

Forest Director denies claims of logging activities in Upper Baram

27 August 2024

Petition by communities asking Premier to halt logging – they did not receive a response

10 October 2024

FDS calls for the termination of the UBFA project

08 January 2025

Penan apply for judicial review



February 2025

Logging continues unabated, Penan monitoring shows large-scale and fast-moving logging activities



21 June 2025

Penan resident reaches out to Premier of Sarawak and Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM)



09 September 2025

International online petition launched demanding the licence to be revoked



24 September 2025

SAVE Rivers and Keruan send letter to Premier of Sarawak asking for clarifications – the letter remains unanswered



6162 People have already signed.

You too can join in!

23–25 September 2025

SUHAKAM's investigative visit to Ba Data Bila postponed following FDS objection



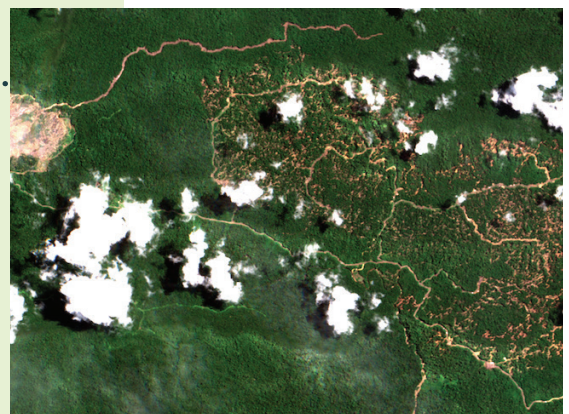
September–October 2025

FDS campaigns against Non-governmental Organization involvement



November 2025

New satellite images show intensified logging activities



09 November 2025

Protest letter to Government of Japan and related ministries asking to immediately suspend funding for ITTO projects in Sarawak



12 November 2025

Director of Forestry Department Sarawack ducks Indigenous activists during his visit in Osaka

17 November 2025

Forestry Department Sarawak attacks Indigenous representative on social media

18 December 2025

High Court of Sabah and Sarawak dismissed challenge to Borneoland logging licence

31 December 2025

Borneoland's General Manager reportedly issues threats and statements that communities regard as defamatory

26 February 2026

Record of Appeal filed to the Court of Appeal of Malaysia against decision of Application of Judicial Review

March 2026

Seven Kenyah and Penan villages from the Selungo and surrounding area unite with a protest letter to declare opposition to Borneoland encroachment

April 2026

Community leaders gather to demand the timber licence to be revoked

To present

Logging continues unabated



1. Introduction: The bulldozers are back

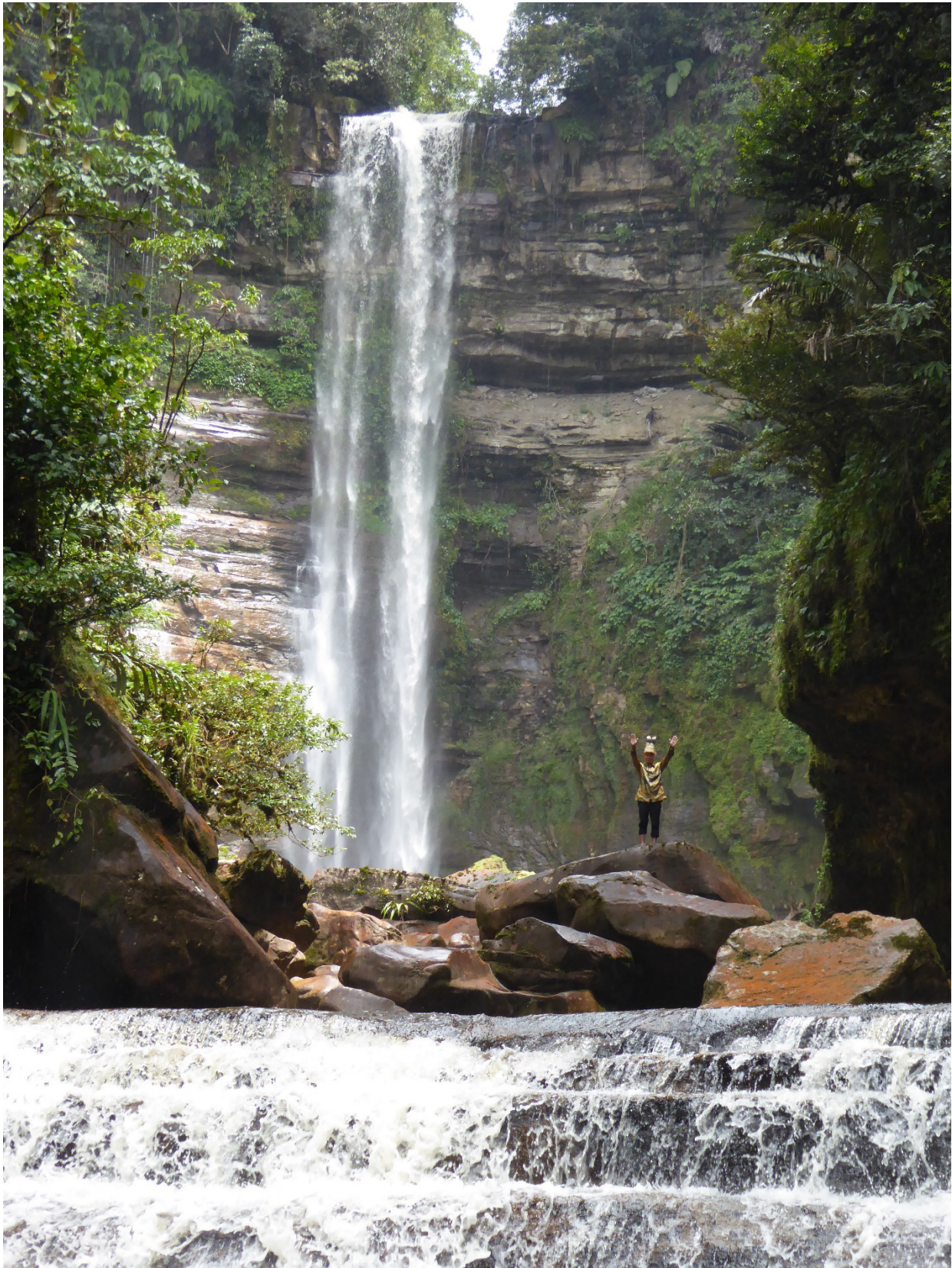


Picture 1: Satellite image of logging operations in Ba Data Bila (SPOT 6, 20 April 2025)

The Upper Baram region of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, contains some of the state's last remaining unprotected primary forest landscapes. Formed more than 130 million years ago, these tropical rainforests are among the world's oldest and are a critical biodiversity hotspot.¹ They shelter rare, endangered, and endemic species, including Bornean clouded leopards, helmeted hornbills, parasitic rafflesia flowers, and towering dipterocarp trees, while serving as vital watersheds and an essential buffer against global climate change.² Sarawak's forests have been home to Indigenous communities since time immemorial – with evidence pointing to a settlement history of at least fifty thousand years.³



Picture 2: Mammoth tree in the tropical rainforest of Sarawak, Malaysia



Picture 3: Waterfall Oong Tekiwit in the Baram Peace Park Ba Data Bila, Sarawak, Malaysia

After decades of state-sponsored industrial logging, it is estimated that less than 10% of Sarawak's forests remain fully intact.⁴ In the Upper Baram, the remaining unlogged forests persist largely because of decades of Indigenous resistance.

The Penan communities in particular have organized blockades against timber companies, documented encroachment, and defended their territories since the logging boom in the 1980s.⁵ The vision for the Baram Peace Park originated in this resistance. Penan communities developed this initiative to secure long-term protection for the forests while strengthening Indigenous land rights and stewardship.

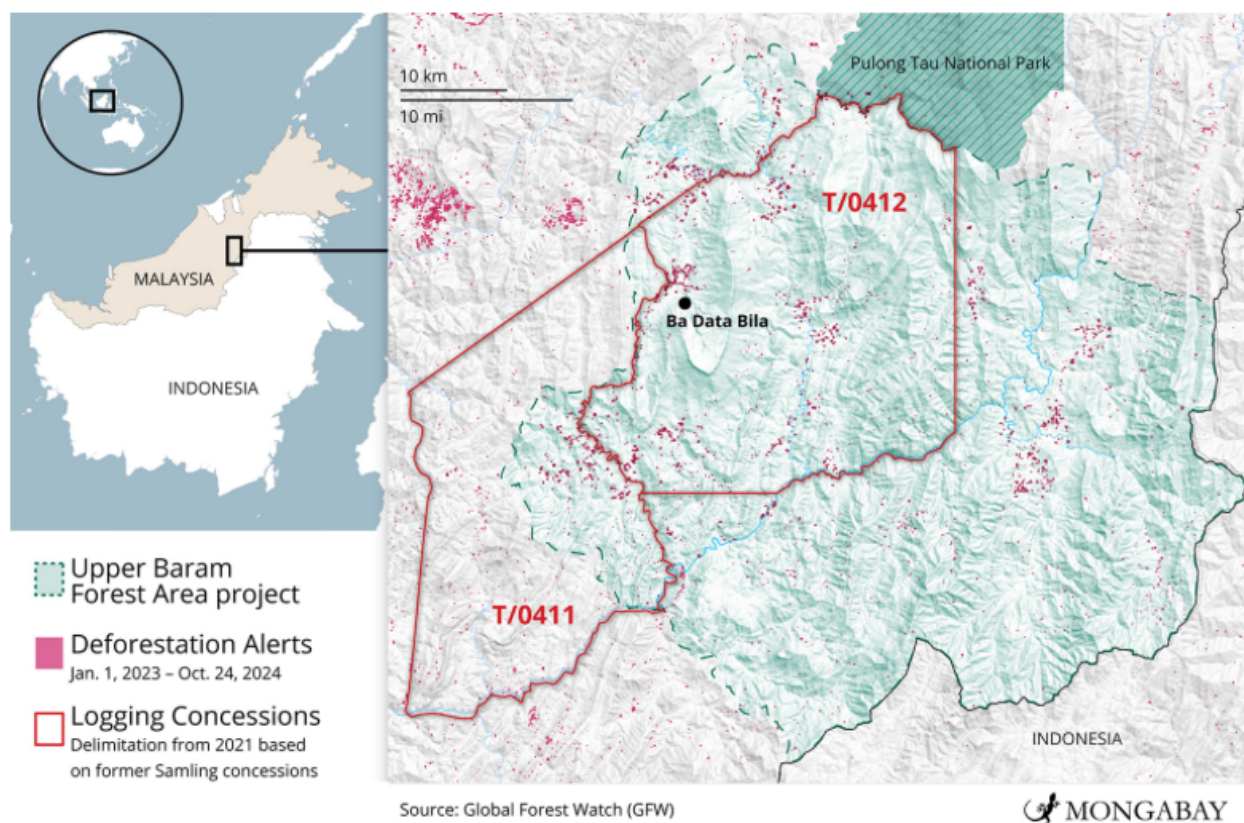
After years of negotiations, public campaigning, and political lobbying, by 2020 the Baram Peace Park appeared to have government backing and a shared vision. There was a feeling of great optimism among all parties – particularly the community members who worked to make this vision a reality:

“The communities welcome the Sarawak Forest Department’s initiative and the ITTO’s endorsement. This is an important signal to the communities who have been waiting for the project to move forward. It shows that the government and the international community are taking the communities’ concerns and interests seriously. Baram communities are keen to see what the protected zones will entail and welcome their new role as key decision-makers in this plan.”⁶

– Peter Kallang, Indigenous Kenyah and chairman of SAVE Rivers

While communities prepared to finally take formally-recognized control over their forests, officials at the highest levels of the Sarawak government were quietly preparing a very different outcome.⁷ **Behind the public vision of sustainable development and conservation, the same threat communities had resisted for decades was being positioned to return under a new name.**

Satellite imagery from August 2024 first showed intensive logging creeping up the slopes of Gunung Murud Kecil, an iconic regional landmark, in the Baram Peace Park's core protection zone. Within months, roads had been cut into previously undisturbed forest and extraction scaled rapidly. The trees being cut in this area were mainly dipterocarps: among the tallest tree species on Earth and home to significant biodiversity.⁸ Dipterocarp trees are slow-growing, some species add less than 0.4 cm in trunk diameter per year, with growth rates varying more than sixfold across species.⁹ They yield some of the hardest, densest woods known, can live for several hundred years, and are of incalculable ecological value.¹⁰



Map 1: The logging concessions overlap with the UBFA project (Mongabay).¹¹

Shortly before the logging was discovered, a company called Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn Bhd (“Borneoland”), linked to powerful political and business elites in Sarawak, quietly obtained a new timber concession overlapping with more than 100,000 ha of community lands within the Baram Peace Park.¹² No public announcement was made, no call for tender was issued, and no consultation or notification was provided to impacted communities. Yet within weeks of the concession’s issue, chainsaws and bulldozers began operating in the heart of the Baram Peace Park. **Community monitors estimate that more than 160 logging trucks – collectively carrying up to 5,000 tons of timber¹ – leave the concession each month, generating as much as 2.6 million USD (10.5 million MYR) monthly.²**

¹ Based on documented community observations over three months from March, April and May 2025.

² Calculations based on community monitoring, overview document of logging truck loading and timber value.



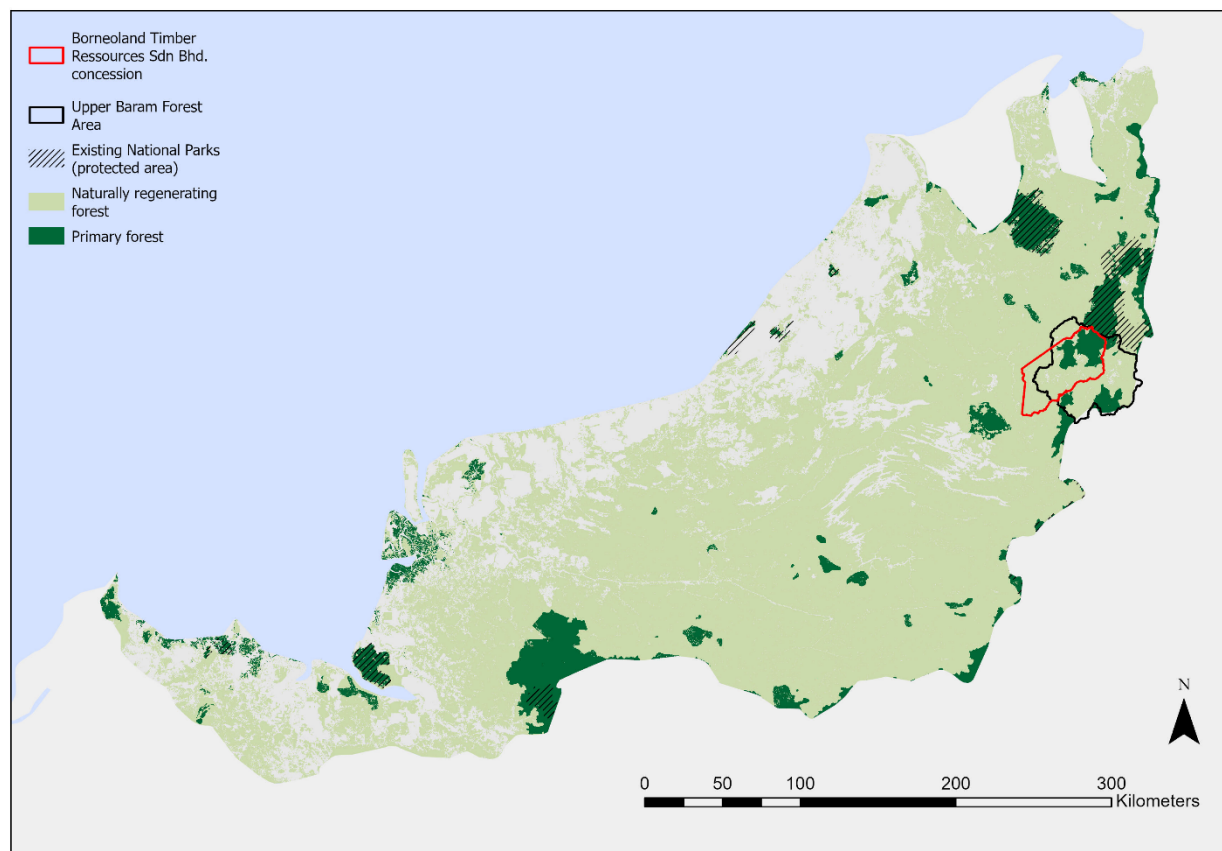
Picture 4: Picture: Logging truck coming out of Ba Data Bila, Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia (October 2025)



Picture 5: Picture: Borneoland Timber Resources Logging Camp in Ba Data Bila, Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia

The timber is bound for sawmills, veneer mills, and processing facilities serving the international market – with credible signs pointing to Shin Yang, one of Sarawak’s largest timber conglomerates, as the primary buyer. Community monitors who track truck movements report that timber from the concession is being delivered to facilities operated by Shin Yang.³ From there, the timber enters export supply chains in which Japan has historically been – and remains – the top consumer, accounting for more than 60% of Sarawak’s total timber exports in 2025.¹³ When contacted by the Bruno Manser Fonds to comment on its business relationship with Borneoland, Shin Yang did not respond.¹⁴

At the same time, the Japanese government contributed more than USD \$150,000 to the ITTO-administered Baram Peace Park project (later renamed “UBFA”). In other words, Japanese taxpayers helped fund the conservation initiative, even as the Borneoland concession was being put into place.



Forest data source: <https://ies-ows.jrc.ec.europa.eu/iforce/gft2020/wms.py>

Map 2: Sarawak’s last primary forests (dark green), the area of the Baram Peace Park (black) and the Borneoland logging concession (red)

This story is not new for Sarawak – a place where decades of logging for export have steadily eroded Indigenous lands.¹⁵ The Borneoland timber concession marks a turning point: a multi-community vision of conservation unraveled after it was repurposed to facilitate renewed industrial logging. **What is happening**

³ When approached for comment, Shin Yang did not respond.

here raises serious questions about the credibility of the ITTO that claims to promote the conservation of the world's remaining tropical forests.

In spite of all of this, Baram's communities believe there is still time to change course. With swift and decisive action, these forests can still be protected before they are permanently lost.

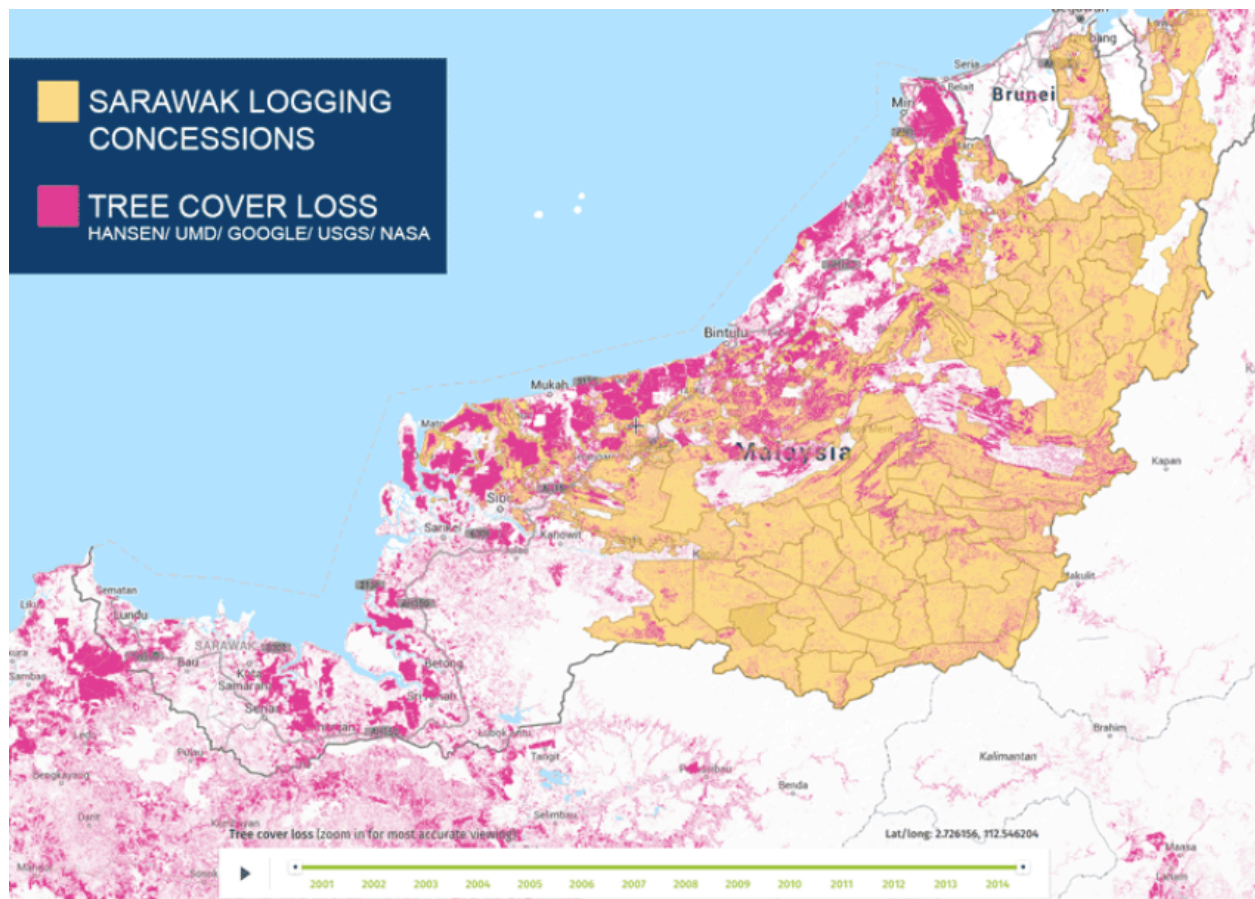


Picture 6: Upper Baram landscape of Sarawak, Malaysia

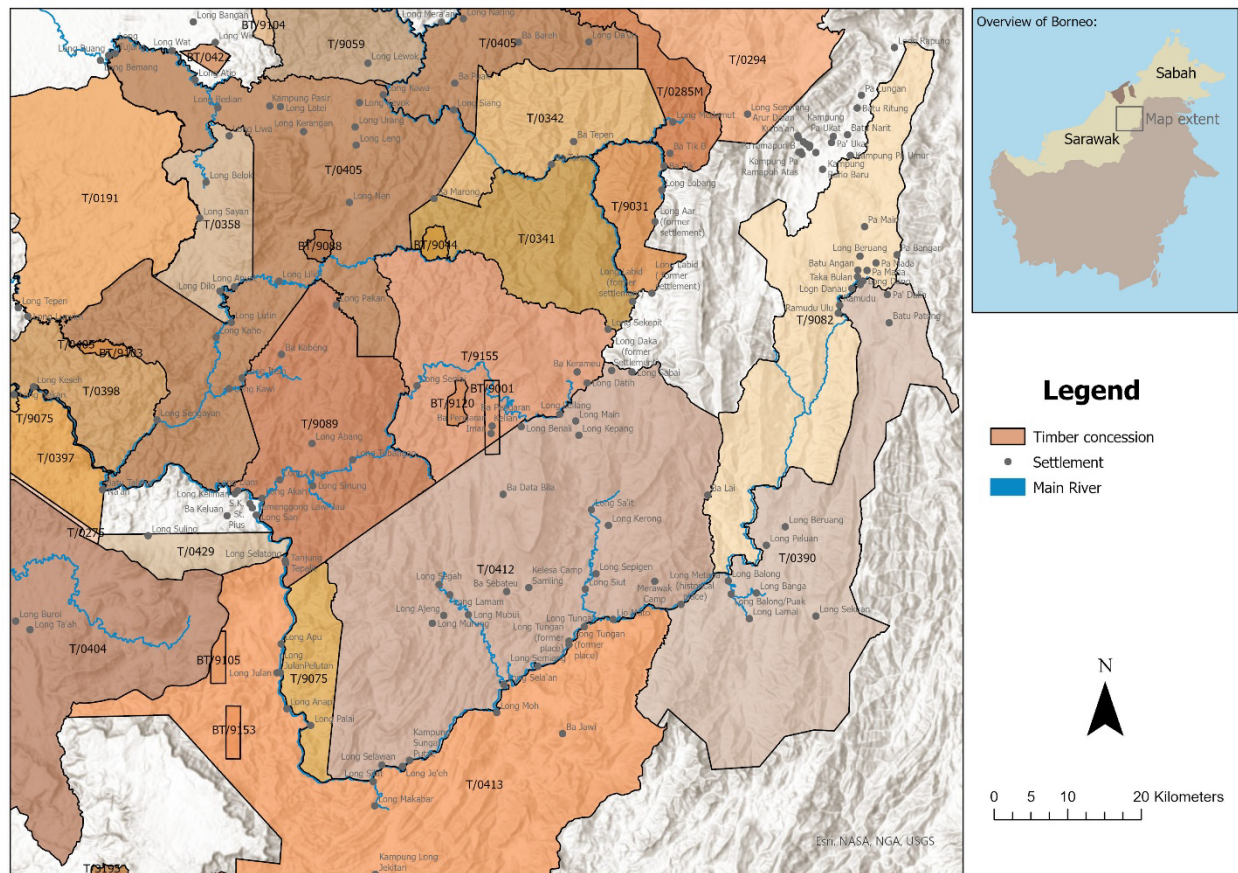
2. The Baram Peace Park: An Indigenous conservation initiative

2.1 Resistance to logging and land encroachment

Since the early 1980s, the Indigenous residents of the Baram region have been on the frontlines of forest protection. During this period the region was divided into long-term logging concessions with no regard for the Indigenous communities that had lived there for generations. Then-Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud (“Taib”) granted these concessions to politically connected companies, fueling an extractive boom that impacted more than 90% of Sarawak’s forests by 2010. **For Baram’s communities, this meant the loss of ancestral forests essential for food, water, shelter, medicine, and culture, alongside the systematic erosion of their customary land rights.**¹⁶



Map 3: Tree cover loss within Sarawak logging concessions between 2001 and 2014. (Global Forest Watch)¹⁷



Map 4: Timber concessions in the Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia

As timber extraction rapidly stripped the forest, communities mobilized to defend their lands through road blockades, political advocacy, detailed community mapping, and legal action. In July 1989, the headmen of 40 Indigenous communities in the Upper Baram and nearby Upper Limbang regions issued a formal declaration demanding that the Taib government cancel all logging licenses issued over their territories. They also called on the governments of Japan and other timber-importing countries to halt the purchase of timber harvested from their forests.¹⁸ When their demands were ignored, communities established road blockades on logging access routes, physically preventing machinery from entering intact forest areas.



Picture 7: Blockade in Long Ajeng in 1989, Upper Baram, Sarawak (Jeff Libman)



Picture 8: Blockade in Long Ajeng in 2021, Upper Baram, Sarawak

Short history of Indigenous blockades in Sarawak

From the 1980s, rapid industrial logging in Sarawak threatened the lands, livelihoods, and cultures of Indigenous communities, prompting widespread resistance. Indigenous groups, particularly the Penan, built blockades to protect their forest-dependent way of life.¹⁹

After repeated appeals to authorities failed to halt encroachment on their customary lands, the Penan, Kayan and Kelabit initiated the first major wave of blockades in 1987, with hundreds of participants erecting over 20 barricades along logging roads in the Baram and Limbang river districts. These actions sought to stop timber extraction by preventing companies from transporting logs out of contested areas. Blockades often involved hundreds of participants and were constructed from logs, planks, and wooden poles.

Although the protests were largely peaceful, they frequently resulted in police intervention, arrests, intimidation, and the dismantling of barricades. A particularly violent escalation took place in the early 1990s, when months-long coordinated blockades across multiple sites were destroyed. On September 28, 1993, approximately 300 state officials, including riot police, dismantled a blockade at the Penan encampment of Ba Sebateu, beating the blockaders, dispersing them using tear gas, and burning down their shelters.²⁰

Despite difficult conditions – including shortages of food, medicine, and clean water – blockades became an important form of resistance and succeeded in drawing national and international attention to the violation of Indigenous land rights and environmental destruction.²¹

Numerous actions throughout the 1990s and 2000s targeted major logging corporations such as Interhill, Samling, Rimbunan Hijau, and Shin Yang. Many blockades were successful, halting logging operations, challenging oil palm plantation expansion or protecting vital water catchment areas, and receiving international attention crucial for pressuring companies to comply with community demands.²²

In 1998, four Penan communities in the Upper Baram filed a landmark legal case against the Sarawak state government and timber group Samling. They sought formal recognition of their Native Customary Rights over 41,500 ha of rainforest and the cancellation of the associated logging license. Twenty years later, the High Court decided against the Penan plaintiffs, arguing that as a historically non-settled, nomadic hunter-gatherer communities, they had no legal claim to the land on which they had lived for generations.^{23 24}

Despite sustained resistance, logging continued to advance across the region, and major corporations continued to make steady progress in the destruction of primary forest for extraction and profit. Sarawak

experienced one of the most rapid log clearances in Southeast Asia. Through explosively expanding oil palm plantations in the 2000s, forests were transformed into monoculture plantations and palm oil became the new economic paradigm.²⁵

Resistance persisted into the 2000s and blockades were re-established at key sites.²⁶ Resistance achieved critical outcomes. It slowed expansion of logging into key intact forest areas, at times delaying operations for years. The blockades drew national and international attention, catalyzing broader advocacy efforts around Native Customary Rights in Sarawak. They also strengthened communal governance systems, as communities coordinated across villages and developed shared strategies for safeguarding their ancestral lands. In many cases, these efforts were accompanied by community-led mapping initiatives, laying important groundwork for land rights claims.

These gains, however, were inherently fragile. Without legal recognition of their land rights, communities remained locked in a cycle of defending against new incursions. Victories on the ground could be reversed by the removal of blockades, the arrival of new contractors, or simply the scale of logging activities in the area.

Land Rights in Sarawak

Indigenous communities face major challenges in securing legal recognition of their customary territories. Under the Sarawak Land Code, all land is government-owned by default. Indigenous Native Customary Rights (NCR) lands are only recognized when communities can demonstrate specific forms of land use, mainly forest clearing for cultivation, prior to 1958.²⁷ The state relies heavily on historical aerial photographs to determine whether claimed land had been cleared, but they will rarely share these aerial photographs. Forests used for hunting, gathering, cultural practices, or cultivation without clearing, are denied formal recognition. In practice, communities seeking recognition face lengthy and costly processes, and many claims are ultimately rejected.²⁸

Despite the state amending the Land Code in 2018 to introduce “Native Territorial Domains (NTDs)”, the mechanism falls far short of recognizing the full extent of Indigenous customary territories. NTDs can only be established in areas that are within, adjoining, or immediately adjacent to existing (legally recognized) NCR land, and remain subject to significant state control.²⁹ The gap between community tenure and formal recognition has enabled vast areas of Indigenous territory to be allocated for logging and other state-led land use initiatives without recognition of Indigenous ownership.

Although the most intensive period of deforestation in Sarawak has passed, logging has not ceased. According to Global Forest Watch, Sarawak alone lost 3.4 million ha of tree cover between 2001 and 2025,³⁰ an area larger than Belgium. Up to a quarter of the forest lost during this period was primary forest.³¹ **Apart from a small number of jobs provided to local communities, the revenue from the logging industry has**

never reached the villages. Instead, communities have been left to bear the ecological and cultural costs of this immense loss.

Despite the communities' success in protecting pockets of forest, resistance alone has not been able to secure their long-term conservation. Increasingly, communities recognized the need for a mechanism that could provide lasting protection by strengthening their control over their territories — even without full legal recognition.

2.2 A new vision: The “Penan Peace Park”

In November 2009, a coalition of 17 Penan villages in the Upper Baram, assisted by the NGO Bruno Manser Fonds (BMF), articulated a new strategy for defending their forests – one that moved beyond reactive resistance toward a proactive vision of territorial governance. **They proposed the Penan Peace Park: a community-defined conservation area spanning approximately 163,000 ha, with its core area around the Gunung Murud Kecil mountain landmark, to be protected from logging and managed collectively.**

The initiative was formally launched during a gathering in Long Ajeng village attended by nearly 200 Penan representatives from around the region.³² The proposed area encompassed critical watersheds, remaining primary forest areas, hunting grounds, staple food sources like sago groves, and culturally significant sites.³³

Gunung Murud Kecil

Gunung Murud Kecil (1626m) is a major mountain landmark in Sarawak's Upper Baram region. The Penan communities of the Selungo watershed tell the following story about its origins:

“There was once a nomadic band that turned to stone on account of chempedak fruits. One day, during a season of abundant fruiting, an elder went hunting. His dogs bayed after a stag with a broken antler, but he was unable to bring the animal down.

He was heading home when he came upon a chempedak tree heavy with fruit. He climbed the tree and began eating, and in his delight he detached many more fruits and dropped them to the ground. When he had eaten his fill and climbed down, he saw the mounds of fallen fruit.

He said to himself, “What a shame to waste all these.” So he husked many of them and fed them to his dogs. The dogs were now sated, but many fruits still remained. “If I leave them here, they’ll just rot,” he thought. So he skewered the remaining fruits and tied them onto the backs of his dogs.

When he returned to camp, the people laughed at the sight of the dogs carrying chempedak fruits. But it wasn't long before black clouds gathered, thunder rumbled, lightning flashed, and a great wind began to blow. Thunder is the voice of a liwen spirit. Stones fell from the sky and petrified the people and their houses. The community was transformed into Batu Murud.³⁴

Even today, some people who go to Mount Murud say that a cliff there bears the shadowy image of a human face. This, they say, is the result of the liwen and what those people suffered on account of the chempedak fruits.”³⁵



Picture 9: Kelesa logging camp with mountain landmark Gunung Murud Kecil in the background

The Sarawak government rejected the Penan Peace Park proposal. State Forest Director and Acting Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Planning and Resource Management, Len Talif Salleh, stated that the Park had “no legal basis and is not recognized by the state government,” because it was located within an area that was almost entirely slated for logging.³⁶ As with earlier assertions of Native Customary Rights (NCR) over land, the absence of formal state recognition rendered the Penan Peace Park legally invisible, despite its grounding in multi-generational stewardship and use by Indigenous communities.



Nevertheless, the Penan communities continued to develop the concept and, by 2012, in collaboration with BMF and local Penan-rights NGO Keruan, had developed a management plan and a Penan Peace Park Charter outlining principles for governance, conservation, and community development. The Charter emphasized three interlinked priorities: Indigenous rights and self-determination, respect for and protection of forest ecosystems, and the development of sustainable economic development initiatives.³⁷

At its core, the Peace Park concept was both practical and political. It sought to formalize existing patterns of collective land management – rotational use of forest resources, the protection of key ecological sites, and community-based decision-making – into a defined territorial framework. At the same time, it functioned as a counter-proposal to state-led development, asserting that conservation and livelihood security must be achieved without industrial logging. The Penan Peace Park was an attempt to overcome the long stand-off with the state government and timber companies over logging in claimed Penan Native Customary Rights areas. Yet, like earlier efforts, it remained constrained by the same structural limitation: non-recognition of their land rights by the Sarawak government, particularly by Abdul Taib Mahmud, the state's Chief Minister.

2.3 From “Penan Peace Park” to “Baram Peace Park”

Abdul Taib Mahmud, Sarawak's longest-serving Chief Minister, presided over one of the world's most extensive periods of tropical forest destruction. During his three decades in power (1981–2014), Sarawak's rainforests were heavily logged and converted into plantations. Investigations by environmental and anti-corruption organizations alleged that the allocation of timber concessions and land licenses enriched Taib, his family, and politically connected business elites.³⁸ It was only after Taib's resignation as Chief Minister of Sarawak in early 2014, after 33 years in power, that plans for a community-conserved area could be meaningfully advanced with the Sarawak government.

Taib's successor, Adenan Satem, signaled a marked shift in tone and policy. In November 2014, he summoned six of the state's most powerful timber tycoons and compelled them to sign a corporate integrity pledge.³⁹ The following year, in a speech in London, he declared that no new timber or oil palm concessions would be issued under his administration.⁴⁰

At this same event, a delegation of Penan leaders from the Upper Baram approached Adenan with a request for formal recognition of the Penan Peace Park. While the proposal had previously been rejected outright, he responded positively under the condition that the initiative be expanded to include other Indigenous communities in the region.⁴¹ This marked a critical turning point, shifting the project from a Penan-led territorial claim to a more inclusive multi-community and multi-ethnic conservation and empowerment initiative.



Picture 12: Indigenous leaders approaching Chief Minister Adenan Satem in London on the Penan Peace Park, 5 May 2015

Implementation was assigned to the Forest Department Sarawak (FDS) – which also oversees timber concessions. Through a series of consultations facilitated by FDS and with technical input from the Department’s ITTO advisor, the late Paul Chai, the initiative was gradually reshaped into a collective framework involving communities and state actors. Due to the strong partnership between the Malaysian government and ITTO, the latter took over a leading role in the project and promised support and funding.

By this stage, the project had expanded to include a total of 32 villages from four Indigenous groups, the Penan, Kenyah, Kelabit, and Saban, and was renamed the Baram Peace Park, to capture the collective will of Upper Baram communities. The planned park now covered a contiguous area of 283,000 ha of forests and farmlands in the upper reaches of the Baram river, sharing borders with Sarawak’s Pulong Tau National Park and the Kayan Mentarang National Park in the Indonesian province of North Kalimantan.⁴² At the heart of the Baram Peace Park lay a 79,000 ha core zone of intact primary forest – the largest stretch of primary forest in Sarawak outside of a national park. Joining these national parks with an Indigenous-managed conservation zone would create a critical wildlife corridor.

Once the Baram Peace Park is successfully implemented, I hope that the rights to the land will belong to us, the Indigenous people. We will only allow people to carry out any work in the forest area if we choose to do so and only with our permission.

– Lukas, Long Murung

The Baram Peace Park carried the same values and goals as the Penan Peace Park, with an additional focus on income generation, such as agroforestry, reforestation and eco-tourism. In February 2023, 118 representatives from 26 participating communities came together to formalize this vision through a joint declaration.⁴³ **The Baram Peace Park Declaration called for permanent legal protection of the core primary forest zone, recognition of Indigenous governance structures, and the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in all decisions affecting Indigenous territories.** This vision was supported by an international NGO coalition, including Keruan and SAVE Rivers from Sarawak, the Swiss BMF, and the US-based The Borneo Project.



Picture 13: UBFA Meeting in Long Lamam (February 2023)

From the beginning, the Baram Peace Park relied on a difficult premise: in Sarawak's weak Indigenous land rights framework, lasting protection required government backing. Yet securing that backing meant relying on the same state authorities whose interests have often been at odds with Indigenous self-determination.

In March 2023, FDS and ITTO formally launched a joint project titled “Management of the Upper Baram Forest Area for Conservation and Sustainable Development with Involvement of Local Communities”. The project referred to the area as the Upper Baram Forest Area (UBFA), rather than the Baram Peace Park, but

was publicly presented as a model of collaborative governance and conservation between the Sarawak government and Indigenous communities.

The original ITTO documents confirm that one of the primary objectives was “to manage the Upper Baram Forest Area for biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development for the benefits of local communities”. The document lists “79,000 ha secured for conservation by year 2” as a measurable indicator of this objective.⁴⁴ A further key assumption was a “government decision to excise [sic] core area from license areas for conservation”. In effect, the project assumed that the Sarawak government would excise the core conservation area from timber licenses. This created a landmark opportunity to align state conservation goals with the grassroots vision behind the Baram Peace Park – protecting biodiversity while supporting self-determined development in the region.⁴⁵

On March 20, 2023, the Forest Department Sarawak (FDS), the ITTO, and project donors formally signed the UBFA project implementation agreement, a milestone celebrated by participating communities. For many, it signaled a new relationship with the government, in which Indigenous communities would be recognized as equal partners in managing their ancestral lands. Keruan, SAVE Rivers, and Bruno Manser Fonds were also named as formal project partners. **This project marked a turning point. For the first time, formal recognition of Indigenous governance and lasting protection for the Upper Baram appeared within reach.**⁴⁶

3. The UBFA project: Promises versus reality

3.1 Sarawak's "green" promises

The optimism surrounding the Baram Peace Park was grounded in a broader political shift. Although many of Sarawak's "green" commitments are now articulated by Premier Abang Johari, it was his predecessor, Adenan Satem, who created the conditions under which the UBFA project could move forward. His moratorium on new logging concessions, his push for integrity pledges from timber companies, and his willingness to engage directly with Indigenous leaders marked a genuine, if incomplete, shift away from the Taib-era model of unchecked extraction. The UBFA project was developed under those conditions.

But the political leadership that made this shift possible came to an end after Adenan's sudden passing in 2017. Under his successor Abang Johari, the green rhetoric intensified even as the underlying commitments were eroded. The UBFA was inherited by an administration with different priorities, and was ultimately repurposed to serve them.

Sarawak now claims to have entered a new era of "green" prosperity – one in which it is "working towards reducing its reliance on logging for revenue"⁴⁷ and "discouraging the cutting of trees,"⁴⁸ instead turning to a cleaner economic model.⁴⁹ Abang Johari has repeatedly insisted that Sarawak "is a serious player in supporting the global agenda of combating climate change, and collaborations with various credible agencies and the federal government need to be fostered towards a sustainable environment."⁵⁰ The Director of the Forest Department Sarawak has similarly emphasized, "the Sarawak Government's continued commitment to empowering communities as key partners in forest conservation efforts."⁵¹ In public, Sarawak's leadership consistently promises that the state "is determined to become a model for sustainable development and climate action"⁵² and that it is now moving "beyond timber."⁵³

3.2 From conservation to "sustainable" logging

The Baram Peace Park, in the form of the UBFA project, was submitted to the ITTO by the Malaysian government and adopted by the International Tropical Timber Council (ITTC) during its 56th Session in Yokohama, Japan in November 2020.⁵⁴ Funding proved challenging, as many ITTO member states had significantly reduced ITTO contributions following the organization's loss of \$18 million in project funds due to high-risk speculative investments.⁵⁵ When the UBFA project failed to secure funding during the 2020 ITTC meeting, its implementation was in danger.

The Bruno Manser Fonds (BMF), one of the project architects, lobbied its home city of Basel, Switzerland, to collaborate as donors. The City of Basel was supportive of the project's goal to secure the conservation of 79,000 ha of primary rainforests within the Upper Baram, and agreed to donate \$200,000, with BMF providing a matching contribution, for a total of \$400,000.⁵⁶ The Malaysian government agreed to contribute approximately \$800,000, and the ITTO managed to secure another \$156,000 from the Japanese government. By September 2022, funding was secured for a scaled-down project proposal with a reduced budget of USD 1.36 million.⁵⁷

After a lengthy clearance process involving Malaysian federal and Sarawak state authorities, community representatives and project funders were finally invited to attend a signing ceremony in Kuching, Sarawak's capital, on 20 March 2023. The event was open to the press and photographs captured Forest Department Sarawak Director Hamden Mohammad and ITTO Executive Director Sheam Satkuru signing the agreement. As the ceremony unfolded, it became apparent that alongside the UBFA project, a second project covering the same geographic area had also been included in the proceedings. This had never been disclosed to participating communities, project partners, or donors.

This additional initiative, titled "Community Empowerment in Forest Management and Forest Landscape Restoration in Upper Baram, Sarawak Malaysia," was presented as a "complementary project," funded by the Japanese government through an emergency supplementary budget of US\$ 258,000.⁵⁸

By this point, the protection of the 79,000 ha core zone was more precarious than the project's public framing had suggested. As noted above in section 2.3, the founding project document declared a development objective for the 79,000 ha of core forest to be secured. Yet the mechanism by which this was to be achieved was relegated to the matrix's "Key Assumptions" column, phrased as a government decision, and only as "recommended." In the language of the logframe, then, securing the core forest was never something the project itself committed to deliver; it was a condition the project assumed the Sarawak government would provide.⁵⁹

That assumption was never operationalised. The plans that were ultimately implemented turned decisively away from concrete measures to protect the core forest. The first Yearly Plan of Operation for the ITTO companion pre-project, "Community Empowerment in Forest Management and Forest Landscape Restoration," funded by the Government of Japan and the Government of Sarawak, adopted a markedly different development objective: "to contribute to the sustainable management of Upper Baram Forests for resilient local communities and ecosystems." The 79,000 ha core forest, the proposed excision from timber licenses, and the target of securing the area for conservation are entirely absent from the document, despite its statement that the logical framework was carried forward unchanged.⁶⁰

Protection of the last major block of primary forest of its kind in Sarawak had been recast, across successive plans, from a measurable two-year conservation target into a discretionary matter awaiting a government decision that never came — even as that same government moved, in the same period, to license the area to Borneoland.

The abandonment of the project's original conservation aspirations became clear on April 19, 2023, at a project stakeholder meeting in Miri, when the FDS Chief Local Counterpart for the UBFA project stated that UBFA was "not a conservation project."⁶¹ When asked what benefits the project would bring for forest protection, the FDS representative emphasized "sustainable forest management" – a requirement already mandated by Sarawak policy.

For communities who had fought precisely to excise this primary forest area from the logging concessions that covered their land for nearly a decade, this broke the key promise of the UBFA. This betrayal would

reveal itself in full when bulldozers and chainsaws appeared at the edge of this core zone and began cutting down trees just months after the landmark project was set to begin.⁶²

FDS has since maintained that the UBFA was never a conservation project, despite the project's own founding documents stating otherwise.⁶³ The way this shift was introduced – quietly and without advance consultation – followed a familiar pattern to participating communities.

3.3 Project breakdown and collapse

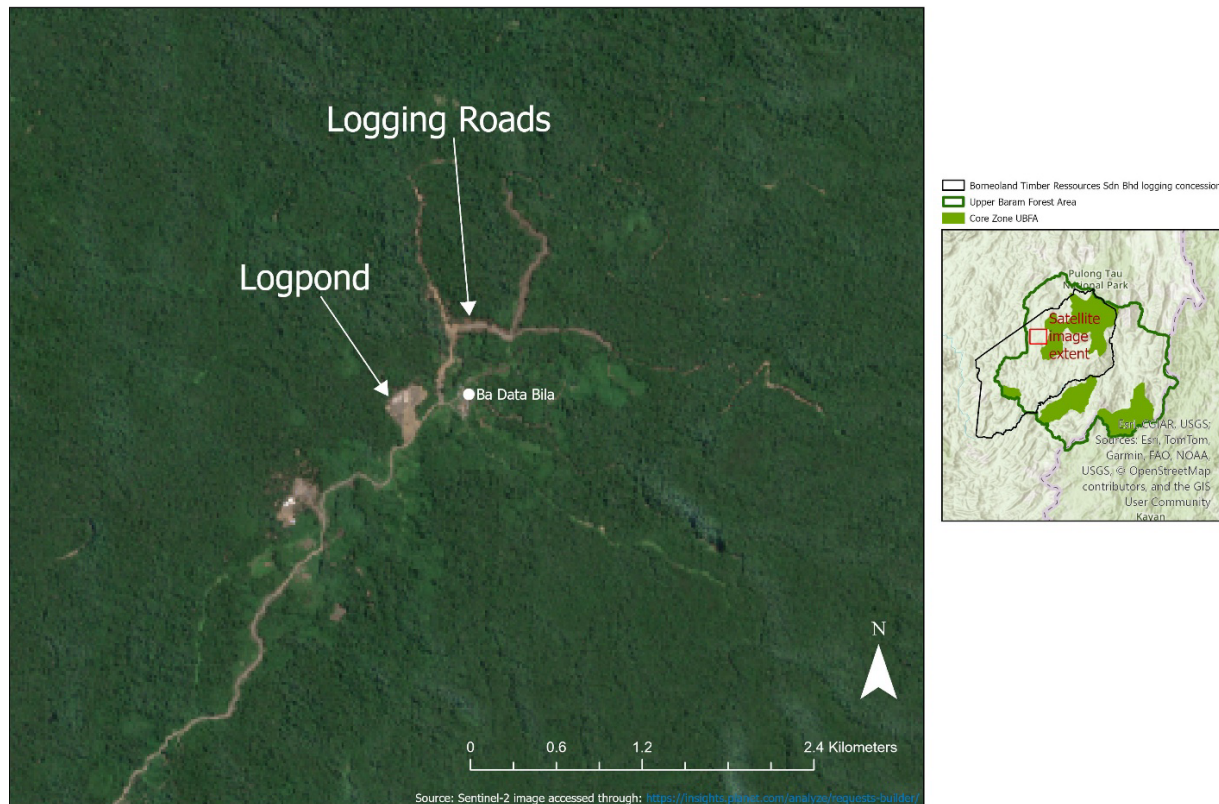
Since the Baram Peace Park concept had been adapted into the UBFA project, stakeholders had tried repeatedly to get necessary information regarding the project area and plans without success.

In a letter sent to ITTO and FDS in August 2023 that never received a reply, Sarawak NGOs SAVE Rivers and Keruan, representing Baram Peace Park communities, emphasized their shared commitment to FPIC and formally requested access to documents relevant to the implementation of UBFA.⁶⁴ The organizations requested comprehensive documentation on all timber and plantation concessions within the UBFA, including boundaries, licenses, extraction limits, and compliance requirements. They also asked for detailed data on forest management practices, such as coupe-level plans, environmental precautions, species surveys, protected species safeguards, and High Conservation Value assessments. In addition, they sought full disclosure of Social and Environmental Impact Assessments, including evidence of community consultation and certification processes. The requests extended to information on all existing and planned infrastructure, agricultural, and plantation projects, as well as initiatives led by relevant authorities. They further called for plans addressing illegal logging and any other documents necessary to support local stakeholders' rights under FPIC.

As a collaborative project, all valid timber and plantation licences, road plans, Social and Environmental Impact Assessments and other relevant documents were critical pieces of information regarding the UBFA project. **These documents were never made available to communities, donors, or civil society stakeholders.** When NGOs raised these concerns, ITTO Executive Director Sheam Satkuru stated that relevant information had already been shared and that no changes had occurred.⁶⁵ This was not the case. Such documentation had not been disclosed, and information on timber licensing in Sarawak remained inaccessible. On 30 October 2023, the Bruno Manser Fonds sent a formal letter raising concerns about conservation, governance, involvement of civil society, and the changing focus towards so-called sustainable logging for the UBFA project. The letter never received a response.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, developments on the ground continued to diverge from official assurances. In August 2023, Samling Plywood's long-standing timber license (T/0412 and T/0411), covering over 170,000 ha within the UBFA area, expired after a 30-year term.⁶⁷ Despite its fundamental relevance to the project, this important development was not communicated to stakeholders. **The timing was striking: the license expired just two weeks after the ITTO Executive Director had assured project stakeholders that "no change" to timber licenses in the project area were anticipated.**⁶⁸ Government officials also failed to mention the license expiry during the first UBFA Project Steering Committee meeting in September 2023.

Shortly thereafter, community members in the Sela'an and Selungo river areas of the Upper Baram reported new logging activity near the core zone within the newly-expired Samling concession, which was corroborated by satellite imagery.⁶⁹ Civil society groups sent formal inquiries to FDS and ITTO requesting clarification on how logging activities could be allowed to proceed in the project zone.⁷⁰ FDS responded indirectly through media statements, rather than through official replies, asserting that no major logging was taking place and that only “community projects and programmes” were underway.⁷¹ This statement was demonstrably false, contradicted by evidence from communities and satellite imagery.



Map 5: Satellite image of July 2024 confirms new logging activity in UBFA area

Community members attempted to raise concerns through other channels, including a petition with more than 500 signatures calling for an immediate halt to logging operations in the UBFA that was hand-delivered to Deputy Premier Awang Tengah Ali Hasan, FDS Director Hamden Mohammad, and ITTO’s Ramon Carillo at a forestry conference in Kuching in August 2024 (see section 6.1). Civil society organizations Keruan and SAVE Rivers also issued a press statement amplifying the Penan communities’ message: “Save Our Forest!,” and urging the Sarawak government to halt the logging and explain the ongoing forest disturbance.⁷² By mid-2024, unresolved questions, particularly around the village of Ba Data Bila, were escalating, and the gap between official assurances and conditions on the ground were becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile.

The situation came to a head in October 2024. Just minutes before a major UBFA stakeholder meeting between ITTO representatives, FDS, NGO partners, donors, and community representatives the local Sarawak press reported that the Sarawak government had unilaterally cancelled the UBFA project.⁷³

In a press statement, FDS blamed “significant interference from both local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), particularly BMF and SAVE Rivers.”⁷⁴ It cited “the submission of official letters to high-level officials, overseas demonstrations, and publishing damaging articles containing unsubstantiated allegations against Sarawak and the ITTO without consulting project partners.”⁷⁵ In effect, FDS portrayed stakeholders' demands for transparency and free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) not as an essential part of a collaborative conservation process, but as interference. The chronology, however, tells a different story. The Borneoland licence was issued in March 2024, months before the letters and overseas demonstrations cited by FDS. By that point, stakeholders had already spent more than a year unsuccessfully requesting basic information about the project.

The surprise cancellation came with an additional blow to communities and civil society: **a new timber concession had quietly been issued to a new company over Samling’s expired concession, setting the stage for the next phase of conflict.** Borneoland Timber Resources would soon become a household name in the Baram, as communities once again came face to face with the destruction of their homelands.

The Undisclosed Japanese Projects

Although the UBFA project was officially cancelled on 10 October 2024, cooperation between ITTO and the FDS in regard to the UBFA continued through two new projects funded by the Government of Japan and the Government of Sarawak. Funding has also been secured for a third project of a similar nature.

The two ongoing projects “*Community Empowerment in Forest Management and Forest Landscape Restoration in Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia*”⁷⁶ and “*Critical Upliftment of Local Livelihoods: Urgent Actions for Community-Based Conservation and Development in Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia*”⁷⁷ claim to improve sustainable livelihoods, support forest restoration, promote sustainable forest management, and strengthen community development.

Project documents list local organisations such as Keruan and SAVE Rivers as participating NGOs and members of the Project Steering Committee. Both organisations, however, state that they were neither consulted during project development nor involved in implementation or steering committee activities.

The forest landscape restoration component has reportedly been implemented in Ba Data Bila, the same area where the FDS granted a timber licence to Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd..⁷⁸ Following the cancellation of UBFA, extensive logging of primary rainforest has continued in this landscape, raising questions about the coherence of conducting restoration activities while industrial logging persists.



Picture 14: Planting of seedlings along the recently opened logging road in Ba Data Bila (FDS and ITTO)⁷⁹

In January 2026, Japanese NGOs met officials from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Forestry Agency to discuss the collapse of UBFA and Japan's continued funding of these projects. Ministry officials stated that UBFA had not been intended as a forest protection project and that responsibility for implementation rests with the local agencies in Sarawak. As a result, they declined to intervene.⁸⁰

These developments raise important questions about transparency, stakeholder participation and oversight. They also prompt reflection on the Government of Japan's responsibility to ensure that publicly funded international cooperation projects are implemented in a manner consistent with their stated environmental and social objectives.

4. The Borneoland concession: An undisclosed allocation

4.1 Early warning signs and unanswered questions

By early 2024, residents of Sawa Ali, Long Lamam, Long Ajeng, and Long Murung had begun observing signs of renewed industrial activity across their community lands. **New access roads were being cut into forests that had remained undisturbed in recent years, heavy machinery was moving into the foothills of Gunung Murud Kecil, and the first signs of tree felling were visible near water sources and wildlife habitats.** This activity, within an area that had been the focus of a high-profile conservation initiative, raised immediate questions.

When the company started entering the forest area in the village and began cutting down trees...I asked them, "Who told you to work here? This area is already a forest reserve, so we don't want you to work here. We do not give you permission to cut down trees here because you did not hold a meeting and did not get everyone's consent."

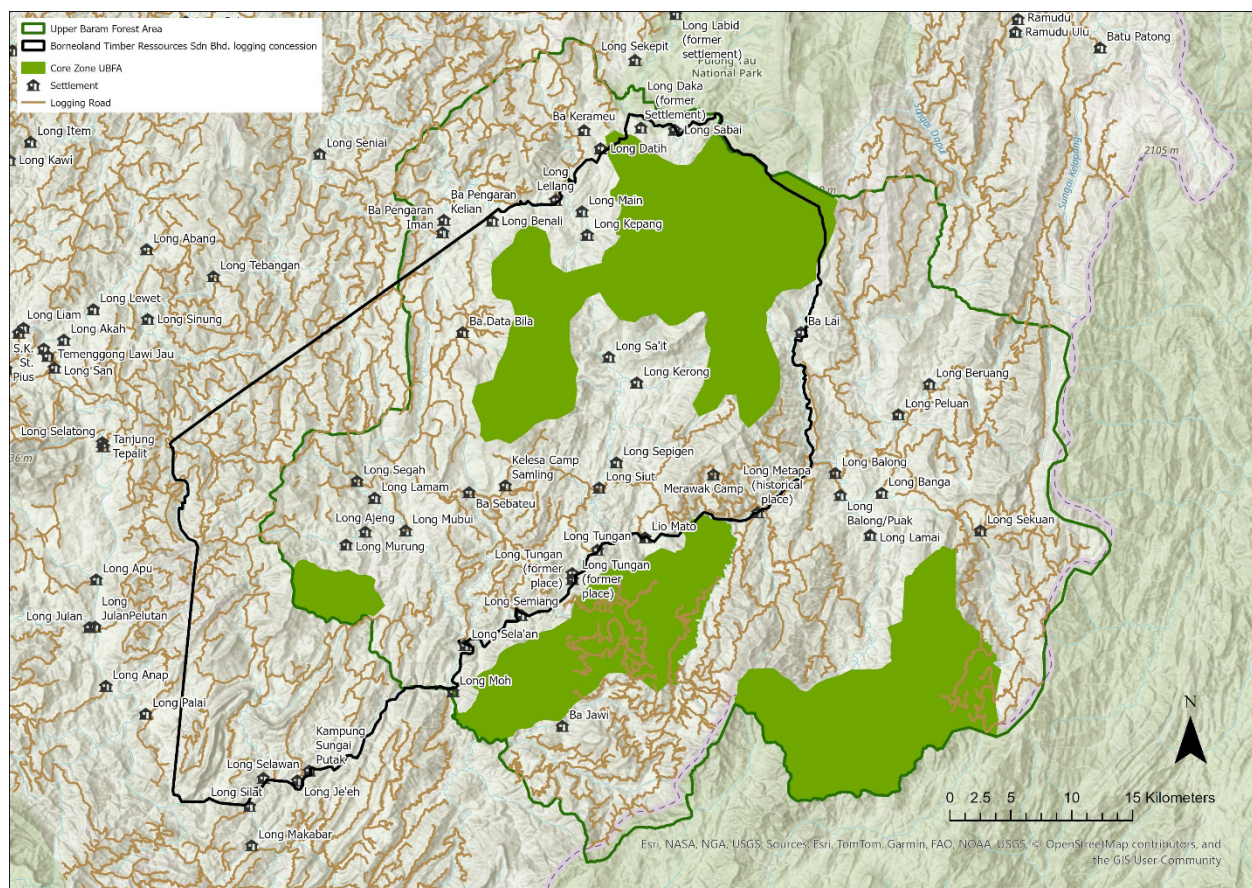
– Langup, Long Lamam

Because the expiration of Samling's timber license in August 2023 had not been made public, communities and civil society organizations sent inquiries and complaints to Samling, FDS and ITTO.⁸¹ FDS and ITTO did not respond. Samling replied on 19 June, 2024, confirming the license had expired and denying involvement in the logging activities.⁸²

The explanation became clear several months later. At the same meeting where stakeholders learned that the UBFA project had been cancelled, FDS confirmed that it had awarded a new timber licence for the area to Borneoland.⁸³ In other words, while FDS and the ITTO continued to present the UBFA as a collaborative conservation initiative, the Sarawak government had already begun a parallel process: allocating a new long-term timber concession over the very forests the UBFA was intended to protect.

4.2 Uncovering the concession

On 12 March 2024, FDS issued license T/9246 to Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd..⁸⁴ The license area spans approximately 170,000 ha, covering both the former Samling concessions T/0412 and T/0411.⁸⁵



I can no longer sleep at night because I hear the machines operating in our forest. Every day, my family fears losing their home. Borneoland is destroying our forest, our home, and they are polluting our water source. How can it be that a company with a licence that has not even been certified continues to operate in our forest? How can it be that the authorities are not taking any action? We are calling for the concession to be revoked immediately.

– Maria, Ba Data Bila

Long before the concession was officially disclosed, signboards in the forest indicated that an active logging license was already in place, **even as official statements continued to deny that logging was taking place.**⁸⁶

Soon after logging began, a small team of concerned local community members began meticulously documenting the large-scale forest clearing occurring in their territories. Their documentation formed the basis of a formal letter to the Premier on 8 August 2024, signed by representatives of 16 villages, detailing the damage already inflicted on customary forest areas, including key wildlife zones such as salt licks (see section 6.1).⁸⁷ Like previous letters, it did not receive a response.

Who is Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd.?

Company name: Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd.⁸⁸

Date of incorporation: 27 January 2022

Nature of Business: “1. Carrying out part of the forestry and forest plantation operation on a fee or contract basis for forestry service activities 2. Wholesale of logs, sawn timber, plywood, veneer and related products 3. Transport of freight via rivers, canals, lakes and other inland waterways, including inside harbours and ports.”⁸⁹

Seat: Miri, Sarawak

Directors and shareholders:

Hii King Chiong (60%)

Yong King Chick (40%)

Revenue by 31 March 2024: 0.00 RM

Revenue by 31 March 2025: 18,096,951.00 RM (approx. 4.56 million USD)

Borneoland Timber is owned by Hii King Chiong, a businessman with longstanding political and commercial ties in Sarawak. Public reporting links him and his family to earlier logging and land development ventures associated with politically connected actors, including past business dealings involving relatives of former Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud.⁹⁰ Hii is politically engaged with the Sarawak United Peoples’ Party (SUPP), and recent public appearances have also placed Hii in close proximity to current political leadership, including events attended alongside Premier Abang Johari.⁹¹ While such associations are not unusual in Sarawak’s political economy, they are relevant to understanding how large-scale resource concessions are allocated. The allocation of a concession of this magnitude to a recently established company, combined with the absence of publicly available information and selection criteria, raises significant questions about how the license was awarded.



Picture 15: Sarawak Premier Abang Johari (front) and timber tycoon Hii King Chiong (behind) at a public event in Miri, Sarawak (Office of The Premier of Sarawak 2024)

4.3 Noncompliance and conflicts of interest

FDS acknowledged that the concession was issued “upon application,” meaning without public tender or any form of community consultation.⁹² This was despite the Sarawak government’s 2016 moratorium on new logging concessions.⁴

In an affidavit in a legal case filed by communities (see section 6), **Forest Director Hamden admitted that the application of the timber licence had been approved by FDS and the Minister of Natural Resources and Urban Development directly. That ministerial portfolio is currently held by Premier Abang Johari.**⁹³

Non-Certification of Borneoland Timber Concessions

In 2016, the late Chief Minister Adenan Satem declared a moratorium on issuing new logging concessions in Sarawak.⁹⁴ The decision was widely viewed as a landmark commitment and a major victory for communities across Sarawak that had long faced threats from logging operations.

⁴ State authorities may argue that licence T/9246 simply re-covered an area that had long been under concession and therefore fell outside the moratorium. Yet the relevant facts are straightforward: the licence was issued in 2024 to a company incorporated in 2022 that had never before held a timber licence, over a concession that had lapsed. On any ordinary reading, this is a new licence to a new operator. If the government considers the licence consistent with its moratorium and certification commitments, it could demonstrate this by publishing the licence and the criteria on which it was awarded. It has declined to do so, even in court.

The moratorium did not stop the activities by logging companies that had already been issued concessions. However, it promised that new concessions would not be issued and that ongoing timber extraction would be subject to certification under the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS), a framework intended to ensure sustainable and ethical practices in the timber industry.

Although the deadline for certification has been repeatedly postponed, Sarawak's Deputy Premier has affirmed that all long-term timber licensees must be fully certified by the end of 2025.⁹⁵ However, there is no public evidence that the licence granted to Borneoland is certified under the MTCS or any other recognized certification body.

In July 2024, four months after the concession was issued, FDS published a statement denying that any large-scale logging activity was taking place in the Upper Baram region. Its Director claimed that the department was “collaborating with a local elected representative and the company to implement several community projects and programmes in the area”.⁹⁶ The statement did not name the company.

Significantly, FDS's July statement also noted that Premier Abang Johari himself had “agreed that the area be developed.” This was the first indirect public acknowledgement that high-level political approval had been granted for forest exploitation inside the UBFA.⁹⁷

By the time these denials were issued, Borneoland had already been granted the concession and logging activity had already begun.

In September 2024, further evidence emerged regarding the nature of the operations near Ba Data Bila. Malaysian Immigration Department enforcement action in the area led to the arrest of 25 workers, including 10 identified as undocumented foreign workers without valid permits. Their reported employment in logging operations raised additional concerns about regulatory compliance and oversight. Yet while enforcement action was taken against the workers, no public information has been released about any investigation into Borneoland or its contractors responsible for their employment.⁹⁸

By this point, good faith among UBFA stakeholders had been badly eroded and the conflicts became impossible to ignore. During the project's planning stages, timber group Samling — whose certified 148,000 ha Gerenai concession was itself written into the original ITTO project framework — continued logging in concessions overlapping the Baram Peace Park. This prompted criticism from project partner SAVE Rivers under its #StopTheChop campaign. In response, Samling filed a RM5 million defamation suit against the small NGO in 2021.

The suit was widely condemned as a Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) — including by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples and more than 160 civil society organisations. Rather than resolving any genuine grievance, the suit was intended to intimidate critics. SAVE Rivers refused to retract its reporting, kept the disputed material online, and in September 2023 Samling withdrew the case on the eve of trial.⁹⁹

The fact that one UBFA project stakeholder had sued another produced enormous tension well before Borneoland appeared on the scene. Certification rules had at least placed some constraints on Samling's operations. No comparable safeguards have been applied to the uncertified Borneoland concession, which covered some of the last primary forest in the state.

By 2024, the sequence of events was clearer. While the UBFA was still being publicly presented as a conservation-oriented initiative, a new logging concession had already been issued over the same area and operations had begun on the ground. The project's collapse did not occur in isolation. It unfolded in parallel with the reallocation of forest lands to a new operator and the resumption of industrial extraction.

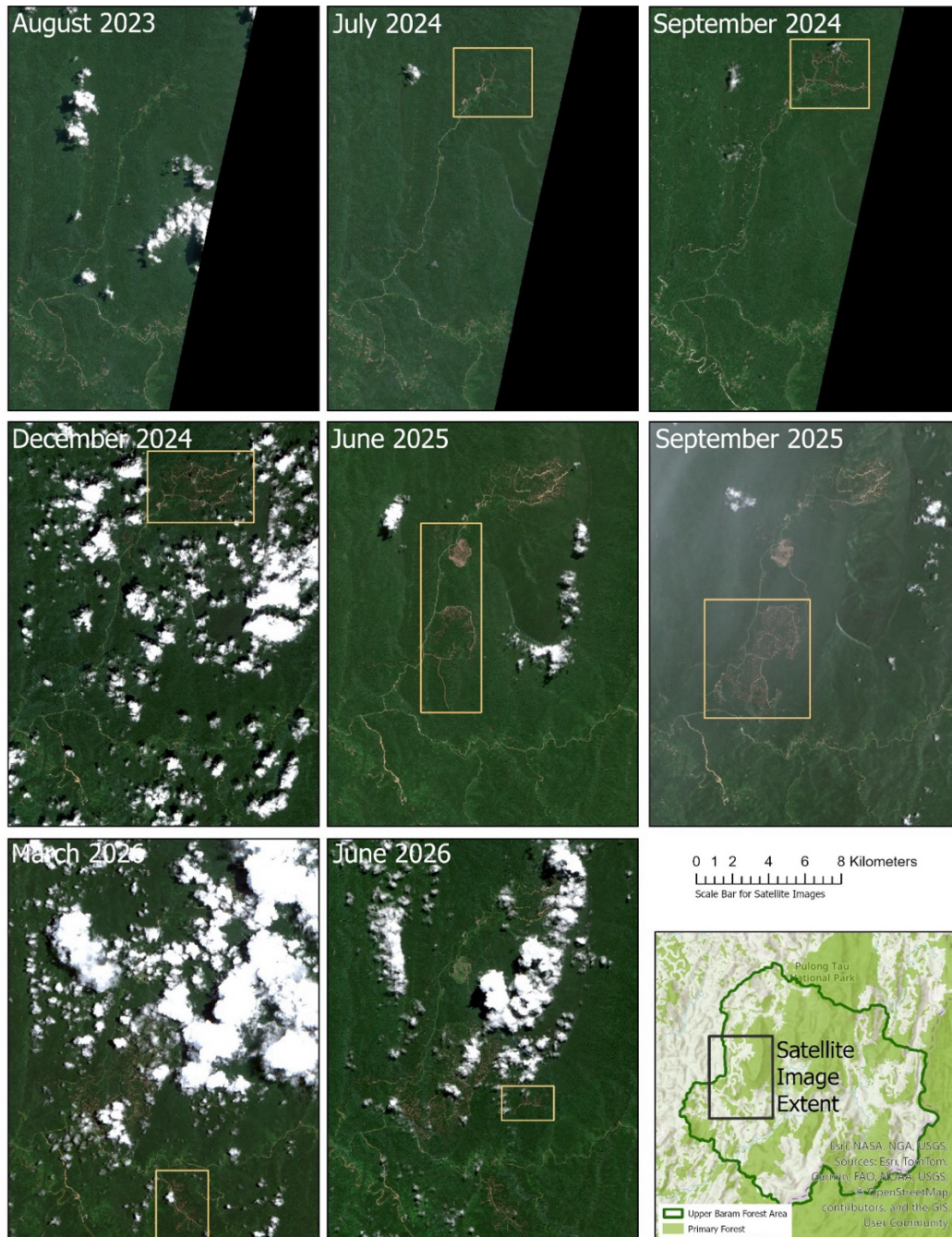
The opacity surrounding the license has made it impossible for communities or independent monitors to assess the legality, environmental safeguards, or regulatory compliance of Borneoland's operations. The Borneoland license thus became the decisive factor in the collapse of the Baram Peace Park vision, replacing a long-promised conservation initiative with the rapid forest destruction on communities' doorstep – nearly 50 years after communities in the area first began their forced battle with extractive logging.¹⁰⁰

This is not only a governance failure; it is a community-level emergency. The cancellation of the project did not merely represent the loss of a long-promised conservation initiative. It meant that industrial logging was now advancing without consent, without transparency, and without institutional safeguards.

As evidence mounted that state agencies and ITTO had enabled this outcome, whether through neglect, silence, or active misrepresentation, communities were forced to mobilize. For them, the consequences are immediate and irreversible. Forest areas that were expected to be protected are now being cleared, often within sight of the villages themselves. The scale and nature of the destruction are now undeniable and are already reshaping the ecological and livelihood systems on which communities depend.

5. Effects of Borneoland logging on the Baram Peace Park

5.1 Environmental and livelihood impacts



Source: Sentinel2 images accessed through <https://insights.planet.com/analyze/requests-builder/>

Picture 16: Series of satellite images from August 2024 to June 2026 showing the logging activities by Borneoland

Logging activities in this area date back to 1988, expanding rapidly and reaching the Sela'an River watershed area (of which Ba Data Bila's river is a tributary) in 2007. For decades, Gunung Murud Kecil had been spared destruction because of its steep slopes. That protection has now been breached. Borneoland and its contractors are now steadily clearing roads up these slopes, putting this ecologically and culturally critical landmark at risk. An independent satellite analysis identified 2,049 ha of disturbed land around Ba Data Bila between June and December 2025,¹⁰¹ equivalent to roughly 3,000 football fields.⁵

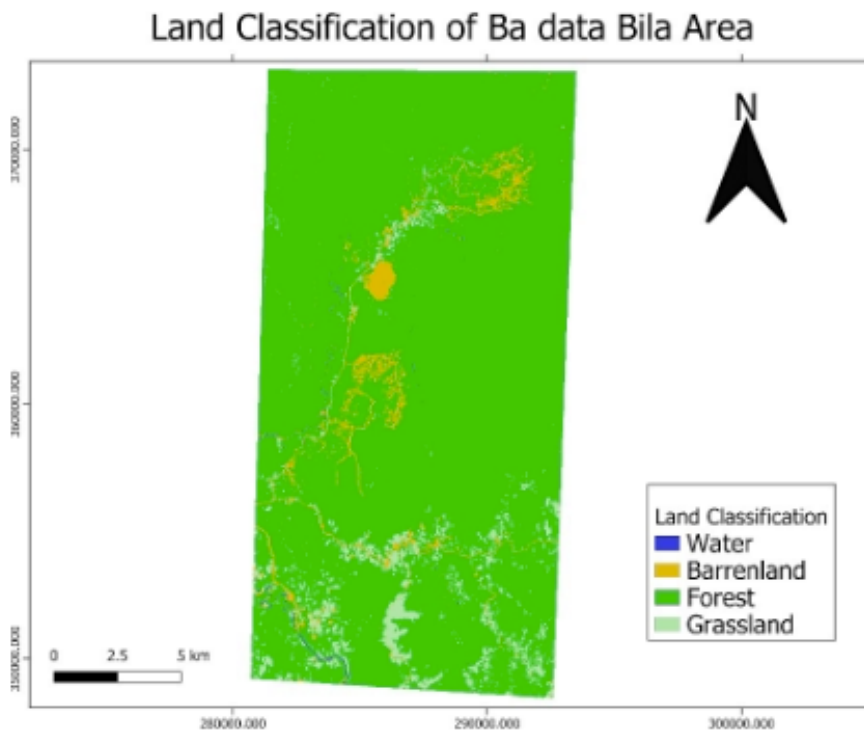


Figure 3: Land cover classification

Picture 17: Satellite analysis shows barren land (orange) between June 2025 and December 2025 near Gunung Murud Kecil in the Upper Baram (GIS Assessment Report)

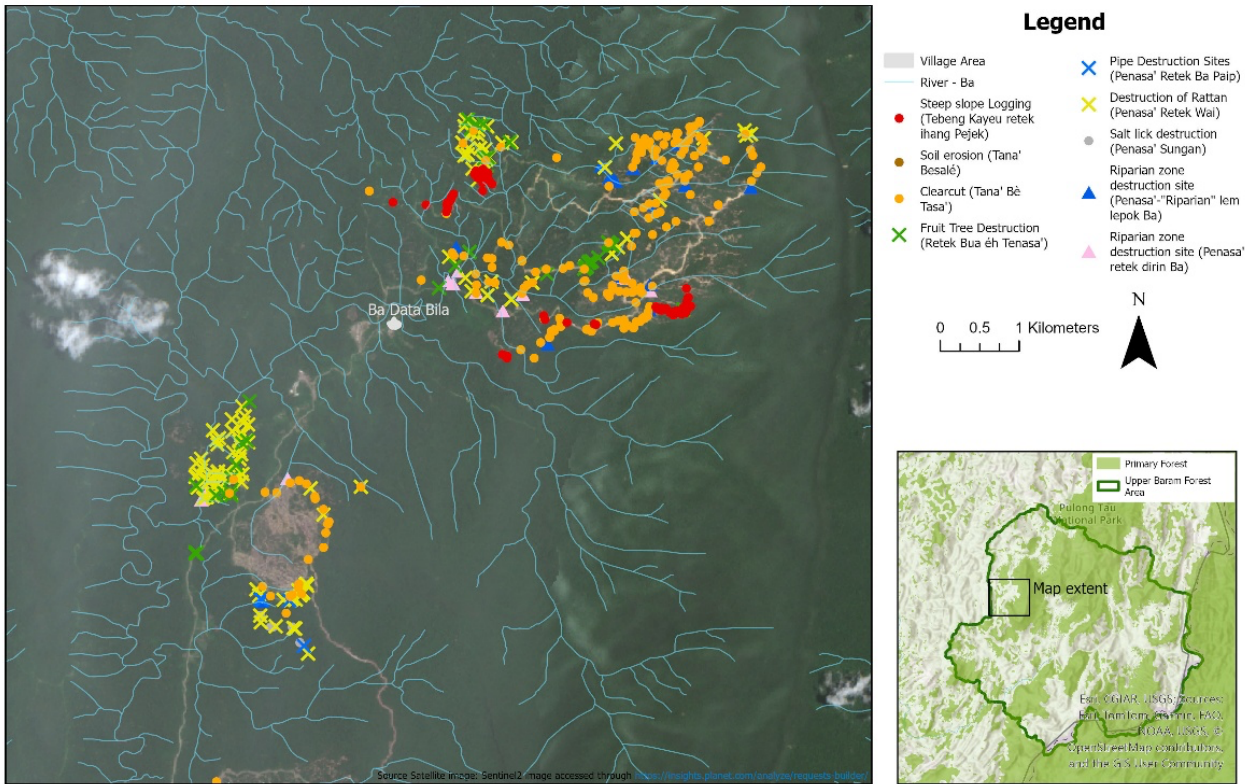
At the community level, where daily life remains closely tied to the forest, the impacts of logging by Borneoland Timber have been immediate and visible. In response, Indigenous community monitoring teams conducted field surveys to document the location, extent, and legality of the logging operations.⁶ The map below shows the sites of environmental damage they recorded.

Community monitors documented the destruction of critical wildlife resources, including salt licks and waterholes where species such as wild boar and sambar deer gather for minerals and other essential ecological functions.¹⁰² They also recorded damage to wild boar wallows, disrupting ecosystems that local

⁵ Calculated with: 1 football field = 0.714 ha

⁶ Over the period of around one month, community members have closely monitored the logged area and the destruction it caused with GPS data, specific information on the destruction and photos as proof.

communities rely on for hunting and food security. Destruction of salt licks is a violation of the **Sarawak Wild Life Protection Ordinance**.¹⁰³



Picture 18: Salt lick destruction caused by Borneoland's operations¹⁰⁴

Water systems have also been heavily affected. In Ba Data Bila, the primary source of drinking water has turned brown from siltation as logging has accelerated soil erosion and degraded riparian buffers. Community monitors have documented similar declines in water quality at more than a dozen rivers and streams across the concession.

Malaysia's **Environmental Quality Act 1974** prohibits the pollution of inland waters, including through sedimentation and waste discharge. If Borneoland's logging caused or contributed to these impacts, it may be in breach of the Act.¹⁰⁵



Picture 19: River siltation caused by Borneoland's operations¹⁰⁶

Community monitors documented logging within riparian buffer zones at more than 30 locations. These forested strips stabilize riverbanks, filter runoff, and provide essential habitat for aquatic and terrestrial species.¹⁰⁷ Their removal increases erosion, degrades water quality, and harms freshwater ecosystems. Sarawak's harvesting regulations, including licence conditions and the Sarawak Timber Legality Verification System (STLVS), prohibit logging within riparian buffer zones.¹⁰⁸

Ever since the logging started, the water in our river has been dirty. This is our only source of water. Borneoland has to stop their activities immediately.

– Jaya, Long Lamam



Picture 20: Riparian destruction caused by Borneoland's operations¹⁰⁹

Logging has devastated areas where communities gather wild fruit, medicinal plants, and rattan for weaving. Community monitors documented the destruction of fruit trees at dozens of locations, eliminating important food sources for both people and wildlife. As keystone food resources for many forest animals, fruit trees also play a critical role in seed dispersal and forest regeneration. Their loss reduces food availability and contributes to declines in wildlife populations.¹¹⁰ Notable frugivores potentially affected by

habitat loss and degradation associated with Borneoland's operations include the endangered Müller's gibbon and the critically endangered helmeted hornbill.¹¹¹

Many of these trees are also protected under the Penan system of *molong*, a customary system of stewardship in which families reserve and care for particular forest resources for future generations.¹¹² Rattan and medicinal plants likewise depend on intact forest ecosystems. **Their destruction therefore represents not only the loss of food, income and habitat for frugivores, but also the erosion of cultural practices and relationships that have long helped sustain Penan communities.**

We harvest rattan from the forest to produce cultural artifacts. This is our only income which we depend on to send our kids to school. We cannot allow Borneoland to destroy our livelihood.

- Rozalina, Long Kerong



Picture 21: Fruit tree destruction caused by Borneoland's operations¹¹³

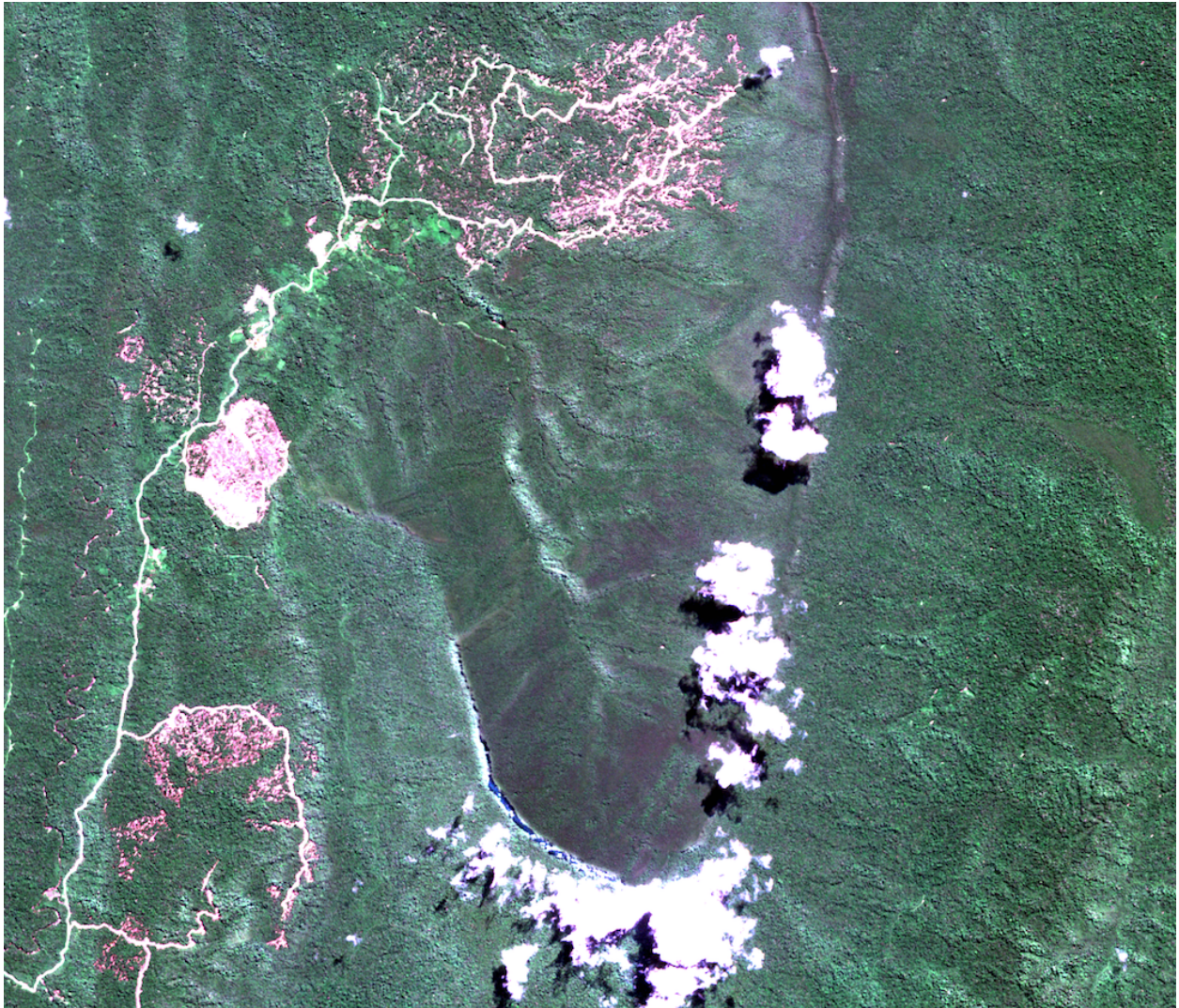
For the Kenyah communities, a similar loss is felt on their *temuda* – fallow agricultural lands cultivated in rotation and reserved for future generations.¹¹⁴ During Borneoland's encroachment into the Long Semiyang area in November 2025, road construction and logging damaged several *temuda*. Among them was the land of Florance Bilong, where the company cut an access road directly through fields she had cultivated for many years. Timber she had stored for future family use, including house construction for the next generation, was reportedly taken by the company without permission.



Picture 22: Photo: Encroachment of Borneoland into Florance Bilong's temuda. Signs put up by her saying "No-go logging area! NCR land, no entry."

At the same time, the physical structure of the forest is being rapidly transformed. New roads cut into previously undisturbed areas open up routes for hunting and wildlife trafficking, especially by outsiders who would not otherwise be able to navigate the terrain. Many species already under severe pressure become newly accessible, including the Sunda pangolin, the world's most trafficked mammal; the Sunda clouded leopard; the sun bear; and the helmeted hornbill, all Totally Protected under Sarawak law, among other protected and threatened species.¹¹⁵

Community documentation has identified multiple logged areas extending across large contiguous patches of forest. This aligns with satellite imagery from August 2024. It remains unclear whether the logging activities by Borneoland within forest reserves or protected forests align with the usufructuary rights under Sarawak Land Code.¹¹⁶



Picture 23: Satellite image showing large patches of logged areas around Ba Data Bila (Skywatch Sentinel 2, 13.06.2025)

In at least ten documented locations, topsoil has been visibly degraded or eroded. Topsoil loss is particularly significant in tropical forest systems, where soil fertility is concentrated in a thin upper layer and can take decades to recover.¹¹⁷

5.2 Social fragmentation and economic pressures

The village of Ba Data Bila is one of many Penan communities in the area – formerly semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers who settled permanently over the second half of the 20th century. The village itself was established in 2003/2004. It is located in the Sela'an area of Upper Baram and shares Native Customary Rights (NCR) land with surrounding communities of Long Ajeng, Long Lamam, and Long Murung.

With agriculture a relatively recent communal practice since settlement, Indigenous communities continue to rely heavily on the forest for their livelihood, their history, their culture, and indeed their survival. The

longer the logging continues, and the more destruction it wreaks on critical forest resources, the quicker the way of life for all Indigenous communities in Upper Baram is likely to be extinguished.

The impacts of logging are harming social ties both within and between communities. The villages in the Sela'an are increasingly becoming an arena of internal tension and fragmentation. While for decades logging companies simply took the resources to which they believed they were entitled under their concessions, in recent years they have taken to preempting resistance at the community level by paying out sums of money or "donating" small scale infrastructure. Not everyone in every community wants to protect the forest – as village leadership and industry-friendly allies in the region profit from logging. Paying community leaders handsomely to provide consent has the added benefit of creating gatekeepers between the company and the community at large. But even pro-logging advocates have largely been strong-armed into an impossible position: support the logging and make some money, or disagree, lose out on the financial benefits, and lose the forest anyway. This delicate dynamic adds a layer of complexity to the already hard-fought battle between conservation and extractive industry, as neighbors are encouraged to turn against each other.¹¹⁸

Community monitors estimate that around **162 logging trucks – collectively carrying roughly 5,000 tons of timber – leave the area each month, generating as much as 2.6 million USD (10.5 million MYR) monthly.⁷ Local communities receive only 6 USD (25 MYR) per ton, amounting to about 1.1% of the timber's value, plus roughly 7,500 USD (30,000 MYR) in minor one-off contributions.¹¹⁹** In addition, one-time donations such as monthly gas, a car, or constructing a new longhouse or church are promised to the community.

⁷ Calculations based on community monitoring, overview document of logging truck loading and timber value.



Picture 24: Gifts presented to Forest director Hamden Mohammad from Ba Data Bila representatives (Forest Department Sarawak)¹²⁰



Picture 25: Unfinished brick houses constructed by FDS in Ba Data Bila (Forest Department Sarawak)¹²¹

The internal fragmentation becomes even more visible in compensation documents from Borneoland obtained by community sources. According to these documents, families supporting logging receive 30 Malaysian Ringgits (MYR) per cubic meter of timber, while families opposing logging receive ten times less (3 MYR/m³).

Left Document: Compensation Payment for December 2024

Log Marking	(-2cm)		Rate (RM)	Amount (RM)
	Volume (m3)	Tons		
12/107B-12	296.7743	142.439	3.00	427.30
GRAND TOTAL:-			142.439	RM427.30

Those who oppose logging
→RM 3/m³

Right Document: Compensation Payment for November 2024

Log Marking	(-2cm)		Rate (RM)	Amount (RM)
	Volume (m3)	Tons		
11/020B-01	454.8011	227.179	30.00	7565.30
11/060B-01	73.3963	40.643	30.00	1219.30
GRAND TOTAL:-			292.821	RM8,784.60

Those who support logging:
→RM 30/m³

Picture 26: Documents obtained by community sources regarding Borneoland's compensation in Ba Data Bila

However, these payments will terminate once the company stops or suspends logging operations in the area. In return, residents are expected to protect logging operations and company interests from external and internal pressure.¹²² This responsibility becomes visible in recent conflicts between neighboring communities where the tension has mounted in the past months and has forced community members in the Sela'an to file multiple police reports.¹²³ The police reports describe the encroachment of Borneoland into communities' NCR land without appropriate consultation meetings, violent encounters between the General Manager of Borneoland and community members, a lack of recognition towards communities that reject logging, several incidents of environmental damage, and encroachment into an area that is a crucial water source for the community.¹²⁴

This pressure to fall in line has been enforced through intimidation. In the case of Ba Data Bila, those who challenged the position taken by the headman to allow logging in their village were intimidated into silence – reporting threats and harassment, with some even forced to flee the village altogether.

The same pattern of compromised leadership has emerged in some Kenyah villages. In Long Semiyang, Borneoland's practice of dealing directly with selected individuals, outside any transparent consultation process, has bred suspicion around leadership and left some residents doubting whether their interests are being represented. This loss of confidence has damaged the community's ability to act collectively. The logging operations have likewise divided residents into supporters and opponents, creating tensions that

run through the village and, in some cases, through individual families. The resulting disputes have undermined community harmony and eroded the social cohesion on which village life depends.

The encroachment has also inflamed inter-community conflicts. Many of the Penan and Kenyah villages in the area around the Baram Peace Park's core forest share overlapping ancestral territories – meaning that the forest is fundamentally a shared resource. Traditional boundaries were historically passed down orally or marked by natural landmarks and were deliberately flexible. Where claims overlapped, boundaries were usually settled through exchange and agreement in good faith, accommodating the needs of neighboring territories rather than fixing strict lines.

The company's engagement with some communities, including the provision of economic incentives linked to logging activities, has contributed to differing views among neighbouring communities over land use and development. In areas where customary boundaries overlap, the absence of a transparent and inclusive process involving all affected communities has heightened tensions and created risks of division. In some reported cases, logging activities have continued in disputed areas without the meaningful consultation of communities that have raised concerns about these operations.

"Where boundary overlaps exist, the area should be jointly protected and managed, rather than opened up for logging."

– David, Long Semiyang

In Ba Data Bila, this divide has hardened into open hostility toward the communities' longstanding allies. The pro-logging faction has begun aggressively campaigning against NGO involvement, and community members who voice support for NGOs or criticize government intervention are shunned and socially isolated. A sign erected outside the village declares NGOs unwelcome.



Picture 27: Signs put up at the junction leading to Ba Data Bila stating the village's full support for Borneoland and saying that anyone supporting NGOs is not allowed to object

Government agencies have compounded these fractures. According to community representatives with direct knowledge of these meetings, FDS organized closed-door meetings with government-appointed headmen, urging them to support logging and publicly oppose NGO involvement.¹²⁵ Communities are repeatedly told, implicitly or explicitly, that they must choose between aligning with the government, which promises "development" in exchange for extraction, or standing with the NGOs and civil society organizations that have supported community struggles for decades. Yet these government promises have produced few meaningful development outcomes: no reliable road construction, no equitable infrastructure, and no benefits that do not require sacrificing the forest itself.

One example of these unfulfilled commitments is the bridge on the road to the Kenyah village of Long Semiyang, which collapsed in February 2026. When villagers contacted the Public Works Department, they were told that the area falls under a logging concession and that the community therefore should ask the logging company, Borneoland, to fix the bridge. Borneoland in turn suggested that any repair would need to be a "win-win situation," which villagers understood to mean that assistance was conditional on accepting

logging in their territory without resistance. This left the people of Long Semiyang little choice but to find their own means to repair a bridge that is a crucial access route to their village.

"We don't agree with logging. We have rights in our territory."

– Njok, Long Semiyang

Now, logging activities in the Upper Baram are expanding into the surrounding areas of Ba Mubui and Ba Sebateu, while surrounding communities along the Sela'an and Selungo rivers are alarmed about possible encroachment into their NCR land. Residents of surrounding villages are closely monitoring the company's movements and have erected warning signs in sensitive areas, including their water catchment, while continuing to voice their objection to Borneoland's activities in the Baram landscape. Without meaningful intervention, Borneoland-driven forest destruction is likely to spread to additional villages across the region.

Compared to the company's substantial profits and the scale of the environmental and social damage, the benefits presented to the communities are negligible. Taken together, these impacts point to more than just localized environmental degradation – they reflect the rapid dismantling of a socio-ecological system that communities in the area have spent decades working to protect. The destruction is rapid and vast, the loss is long lasting, and the benefits of compensation are only temporary.

"We don't like Borneoland because they bring conflict among Penan people. Borneoland just follows their desires without listening to what people want and what their needs are. We do not see them fulfilling the promises to other communities."

– Henry, Long Kerong

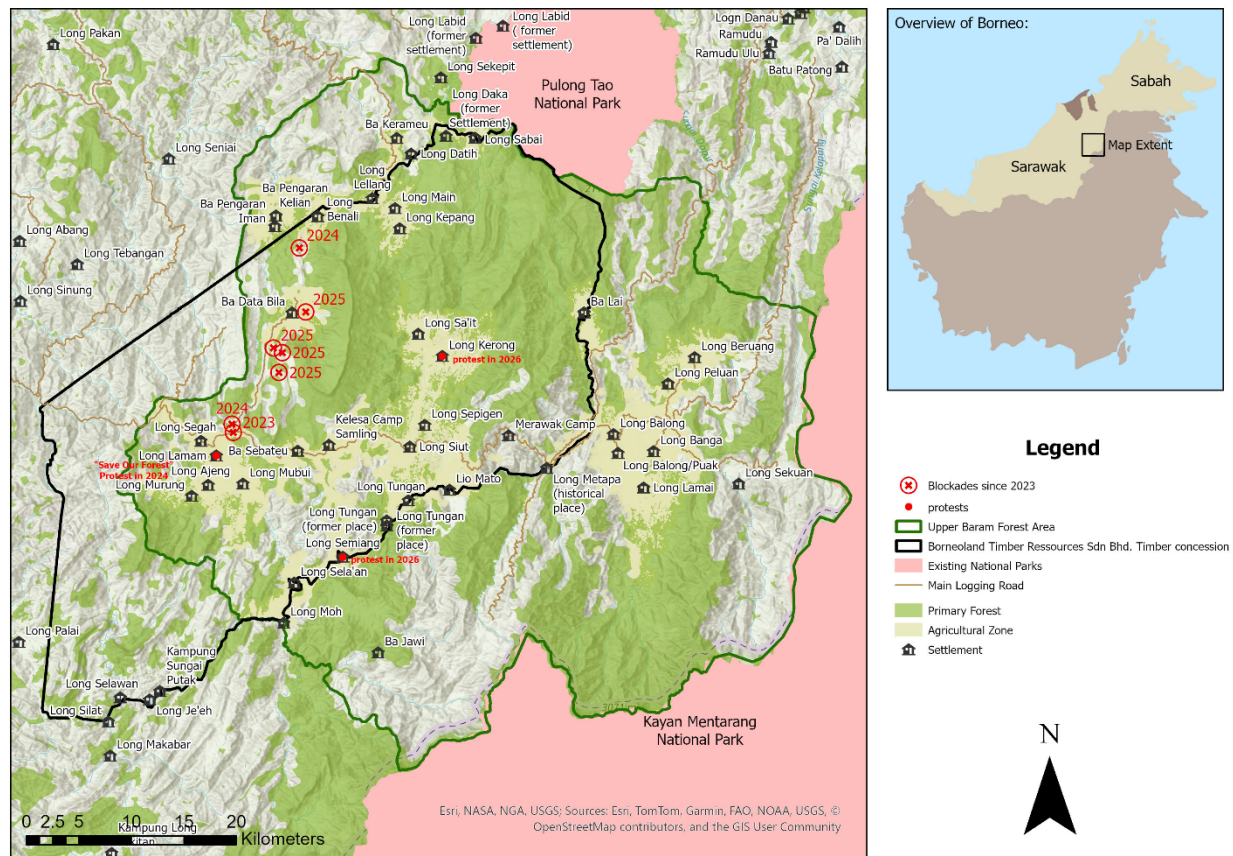
6. Community resistance and institutional failure

6.1 Immediate community response

“If Borneoland stays here, I’m going to die. We can no longer use the water from our river as it has been dirty since the logging started. We depend on this water. If the logging continues, there is nothing left for us.”

– Nilson, Ba Data Bila

As forest destruction in Upper Baram escalated in early 2025, communities began to mobilize. Several Penan communities initiated direct action through new blockades, petitions, and formal complaints. Their demands were straightforward: halt Borneoland’s operations, release the concealed documents, and uphold communities’ rights to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC).¹²⁶ **The complete lack of engagement that followed exposed a deeper failure: Sarawak’s institutions did not protect Indigenous rights, while ITTO failed to uphold the standards of a project carried out under its own mandate.**



Map 8: Blockades and protests against Borneoland between 2023 and 2026 in the Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia

In early August 2024, representatives from Ba Data Bila sent a letter to the Sarawak Premier, signed by nearly 600 Penan representatives across 16 villages in the UBFA area, including 44 residents from Ba Data Bila.¹²⁷ It urged the Premier to intervene immediately. At the same time, more than 100 community members gathered in the nearby village of Long Lamam and erected an *Oro*, a traditional Penan signpost made of leaves, declaring: “Save our Forest!”¹²⁸ Community representatives also expressed their concern about logging roads that were nearing the core conservation zone of the Baram Peace Park, as well as the increasing tensions in the village of Ba Data Bila between pro- and anti-logging factions.



Picture 28: Community protest against logging in Upper Baram with a clear message: “SAVE OUR FOREST!” (August 2024)

Later that month, a Penan delegation hand-delivered the petition to the Sarawak Deputy Premier, the Director of Forests, and an ITTO representative at a conference in Kuching.¹²⁹ No officials have provided a substantive response, reinforcing the pattern of institutional silence that communities had faced throughout the UBFA process.

6.2 Formal action and state obstruction

As repeated appeals were ignored, communities escalated to formal legal and institutional channels. In January 2025, Indigenous representatives from 11 communities filed a judicial review in the High Court of Sabah and Sarawak, challenging the legality of the concession granted to Borneoland. In their lawsuit, Penan elders led by Nilson Deng of Ba Data Bila argued that the license encompassing their native customary territory was issued without FPIC, without proper environmental and social impact assessments, and without providing the right for affected communities to object or be heard.¹³⁰

More than a year into the proceedings, the Sarawak government still has not produced key documents, including impact assessments, timber harvesting plans, and a copy of the timber licence itself. As a result, any assertion that the operations are lawful because they proceed under a validly issued license cannot be independently verified. The continued withholding of these documents has further undermined transparency and raised serious concerns about the integrity of the process by which the timber concession was allocated.

Almost a year after the judicial review was filed, the High Court of Sabah and Sarawak dismissed the case, ruling in favor of the Forest Department Sarawak and against the affected communities. According to the judge, “the 11 applicants failed to prove *locus standi* that they were directly affected by the licence and lacked sufficient evidence to support claims of illegality, procedural impropriety or irrationality in the licence approval.”¹³¹ In the same press statement on the case, the Forest Director welcomed the decision by the judge and further stated that NGOs were hindering development in the Baram area. In response to this dismissal, the 11 applicants have now taken the case to the Malaysian Court of Appeal.¹³² The dismissal reflects a deeper structural injustice: without formal legal recognition of their customary territories under Sarawak's Land Code (see box “Land Rights in Sarawak” in section 2), communities struggle to prove standing over the very forests they have used and stewarded for generations.

Parallel to the legal actions taken, the communities raising concerns through formal human rights channels continued to encounter obstruction. In June 2025, a resident of Ba Data Bila submitted a complaint to SUHAKAM, the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia. The complaint documented the logging encroachment, environmental degradation, verbal threats by timber workers and their associates, and acts of intimidation such as the dismantling of blockades or the destruction of water pipes.¹³³ SUHAKAM initiated follow-up inquiries, but the response from FDS was dismissive, characterizing the allegations as “baseless and unfounded speculation” and attributing community resistance to NGO influence.¹³⁴ A site visit scheduled for September 2025 was postponed at the last minute after FDS invoked Section 12(3) of the Human Rights Commission Act, citing the ongoing judicial review.¹³⁵ The request came from government-appointed headman of Ba Data Bila and was agreed to by the FDS, which effectively stalled an independent investigation into the human rights dimensions of the situation.¹³⁶

In support of the communities, Swiss NGO Bruno Manser Fonds launched the “Save the Baram Forest” campaign on September 9, 2025. Forest activists protested the arrival of Abang Johari and his delegation outside the UNESCO building in Paris. BMF Director Lukas Straumann said the Premier was “not credible if he promotes green energy internationally and at the same time allows the destruction of Sarawak’s last primary rainforests,” and urged him to halt the destruction of the Baram Forest.¹³⁷

Simultaneously, BMF published the campaign video “Hutan Borneo dalam bahaya!” (engl. Save the Baram forest)¹³⁸ which drew significant public attention to the situation in Ba Data Bila within hours, with well over half a million views. The video helped amplify community concerns about deforestation, corruption and social injustice. Neither the Sarawak government, nor the logging company responded publicly. Two weeks later, SAVE Rivers and Keruan sent a letter to the Premier asking 11 questions about logging activities in Ba Data Bila.¹³⁹ They have not received a response to date.

While communities pursued these grievance mechanisms, logging continued. **The absence of meaningful response from state authorities, combined with delayed and obstructed oversight processes, left communities with limited options to protect their lands beyond continued protest, legal action and international advocacy.**

“Respect our voices to defend our rights.” – Jakup, Long Semiyang

As communities’ grievances remained unanswered in Sarawak and at a federal level, NGOs wrote to the Government of Japan, the largest buyer of Sarawak timber, urging it to address the role of Japanese demand in driving forest destruction in Sarawak.¹⁴⁰ A group of activists also travelled to Japan to raise these concerns directly. They attempted to meet Forest Director Hamden Mohammad during a seminar at the Osaka Metropolitan University, but the event was cancelled at the last minute for all but a select group of attendees.¹⁴¹

A Penan activist from Upper Baram who joined the trip to Japan shared a video on social media calling on the Japanese government that their current funding for projects in Upper Baram is causing harm for local communities and the environment by activities linked to their funded projects in the Upper Baram.¹⁴² Previous community efforts to engage the FDS had gone unanswered. In contrast, the FDS lead for the UBFA project publicly attacked the Indigenous Penan activist in the comment section, calling him “boy” and telling him to “be smarter, more action [and] talk less bullshit”.¹⁴³ Forest Department Sarawak also publicly described the Indigenous activists as “traitors to the nation,” and alleged that their “immoral activities” were funded by foreign NGOs.¹⁴⁴



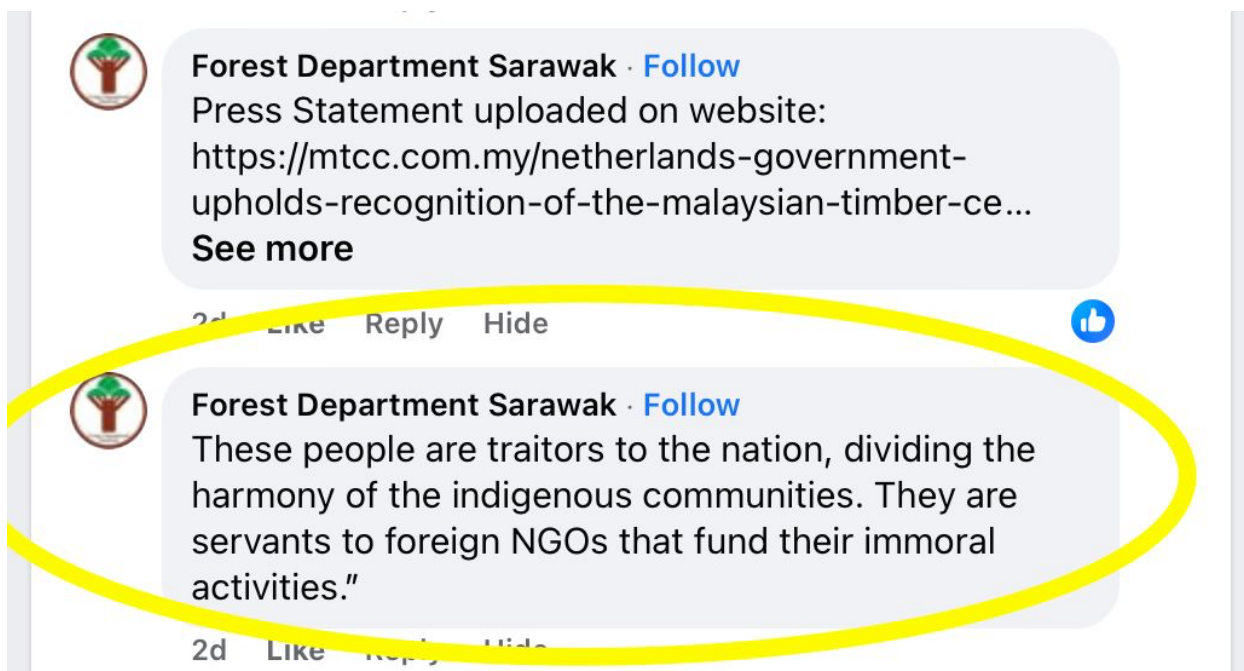
Evelyn Jugi

Better get your information right, boy, before you so confidently drag an organisation into your twisted facts unnecessarily. Which communities are being sidelined? I thought the communities of Upper Baram rejected your involvement because of the facts and the way you portray them. Sorry lah boy, I cannot accept just let you tarnish a good organisation like ITTO who in fund for community development and they are not as you claimed bringing in destruction to the forest. How many millions have you brought in to assist with the community development. Or you claimed to be the indigenous, did you suffer with them back in your own village? Be smarter, more action talk less bullshit.

29w Like Reply

4

Picture 29: Official from FDS attacks Indigenous activist on Facebook¹⁴⁵

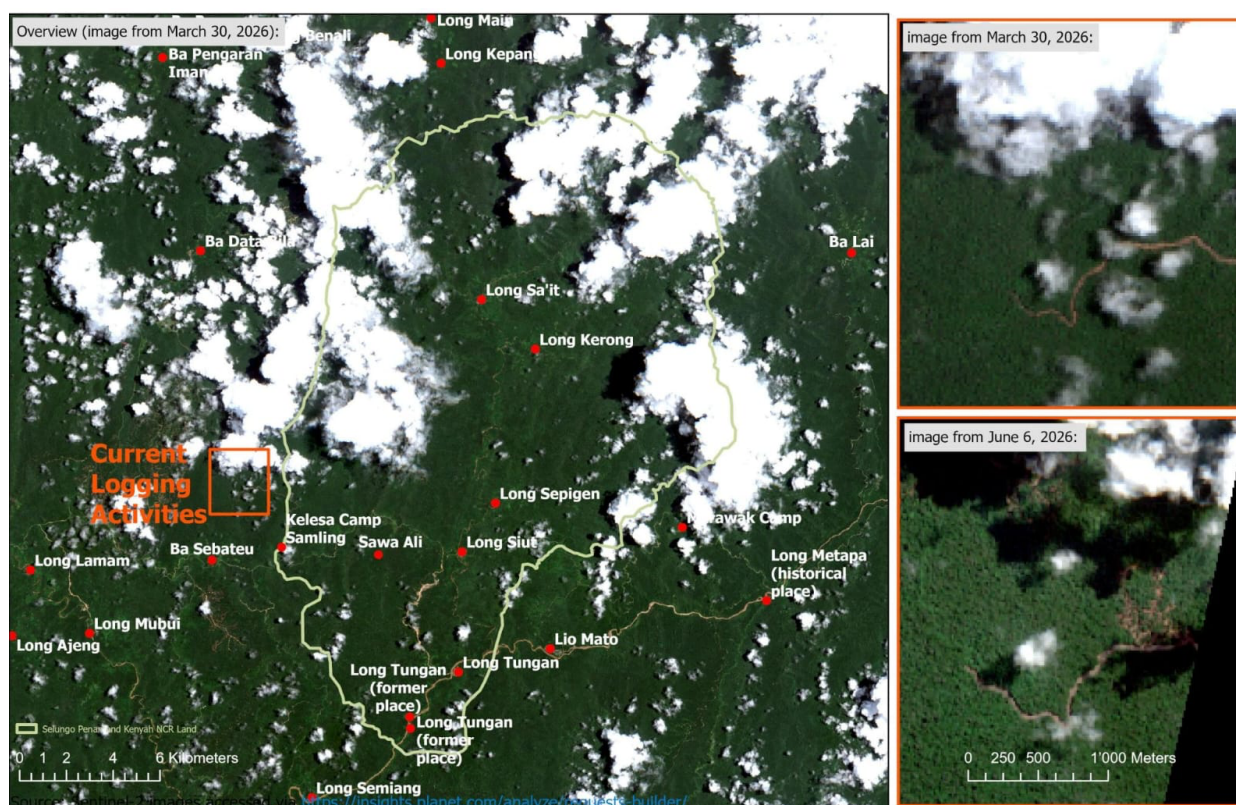


Picture 30: Forest Department Sarawak comments on Facebook¹⁴⁶

Communities continued to seek help from SUHAKAM. In March 2026, residents of Sawa Ali sent a letter demanding immediate action over logging activities near their village. The letter highlighted the authorities' continued disregard towards the community of Sawa Ali.¹⁴⁷ Although people have lived in Sawa Ali since 2017¹⁴⁸ and the village submitted the nomination for its chief in June 2020, but it has still not been officially recognized by the government. According to SUHAKAM, this lack of official recognition has caused significant difficulties for the village's 55 residents, comprising 22 families, particularly in obtaining basic amenities, services, and assistance from government agencies.¹⁴⁹ To date, the village is still waiting for their rights to be recognized and respected.



Picture 31: Village of Sawa Ali in the Upper Baram, Sarawak, Malaysia



Map 9: Logging activities moving east from the Sela'an towards the Selungo

Logging operations started in Ba Data Bila and then spread to Ba Sebateu and Ba Mubui, Borneoland has since expanded towards Selaan and Selungo territories, alarming surrounding villages. In March 2026, seven Penan and Kenyah communities from the Selungo and surrounding areas sent a letter to Borneoland and the FDS, stating their firm rejection to any activities carried out on their NCR land.¹⁵⁰ One month later, community representatives gathered in protest, demanding the immediate revocation of the timber licence.¹⁵¹

Once the forest is gone, there is nothing left for the young people in the village. This is the land that our ancestors conserved for us and now it is destroyed by Borneoland. Revoke their licence – our future depends on this!

– Bronson, Long Kerong



Picture 32: Community representatives from Long Kerong, Long Sepigen, Long Lamam, Long Murung, Sawa Ali and Ba Olé gathering to demand the timber licence to be revoked

6.3 Institutional capture: ITTO's structural failure

The crisis in the Upper Baram has exposed a deeper structural failure within the ITTO, whose mandate explicitly commits it to safeguarding forests, ensuring Indigenous participation, and

enforcing transparent and accountable project governance.¹⁵² In the case of UBFA, **ITTO endorsed a fundamental alteration of the project’s core conservation objective: from protecting primary forest to pursuing “sustainable management” through logging within those concessions.**

Funds raised for a conservation initiative were ultimately used to support a fundamentally different approach. By acquiescing to these changes, the ITTO enabled state authorities to repurpose a community-led conservation initiative into a pathway for industrial logging. The communities whose decades-long vision had given the UBFA political legitimacy were left without recourse or explanation. Letters went unanswered, petitions received no substantive response, and requests for basic project documentation were ignored. When civil society organizations formally raised concerns about the project’s shifting direction, ITTO’s Executive Director responded by asserting that all relevant information had already been shared and that no significant changes had occurred.¹⁵³ ITTO failed to uphold the minimum standards it sets for member states and for itself, undermining not just the Indigenous communities’ vision for a Baram Peace Park, but also the integrity of its global mandate.

ITTO presents itself as an independent guardian of sustainable forest governance.¹⁵⁴ But a closer look at its institutional foundations raises serious questions about how independent it can realistically be – particularly in a case involving Malaysia’s timber sector.

ITTO has been headquartered in Japan since its establishment in 1986 under the International Tropical Timber Agreement.¹⁵⁵ Japan is not a neutral host. As documented elsewhere in this report, Japan is the single largest market for Sarawak’s timber exports, accounting for more than 60% of Sarawak’s total timber and timber product export earnings in 2025.¹⁵⁶ Japan also provided \$156,000 in funding for the UBFA through an emergency supplementary budget. That funding arrived alongside an undisclosed parallel project and was ultimately directed toward an initiative that facilitated, rather than prevented, logging (see section 3.3).

ITTO’s lack of independence from logging interest extends to its leadership. Sheam Satkuru, ITTO’s Executive Director since 2022, served as the Malaysian Timber Council’s Regional Director for Europe from 2007 to 2017 – a role focused explicitly on promoting Malaysian timber exports in international markets.¹⁵⁷ Her career prior to joining ITTO was built on advancing the commercial interests of the very industry whose environmental impact she would later be charged with helping to curb. Her appointment as Executive Director was bolstered by the Malaysian government while Malaysia remains a highly influential ITTO member state. On 29 October 2024, less than three weeks after the termination of the UBFA project by the Sarawak government, she informed ITTO member states of her intention to seek an extension of her term for another two years.¹⁵⁸ **Her tenure therefore depends, in part, on the continued support of the government whose conservation commitments she was meant to hold to account.**¹⁵⁹

In the context of the UBFA project, ITTO’s acquiescence to a fundamental shift away from conservation and toward logging directly served Malaysian and Japanese state and commercial interests. Although sustainable forest management with an integrated management plan was part of the project, the goal of the UBFA was a “protected area for conservation, sustainable development and community use” with the protection of the 79,000 ha of primary forest.¹⁶⁰

What communities, donors, and civil society organizations experienced as a series of failures — unanswered letters, ignored concerns, assurances that contradicted observable reality — can be understood in this light not as a sequence of unfortunate oversights, but as the predictable result of an institution structurally ill-equipped to act as an independent check on the interests of its most powerful members.

6.4 Contravention of legal and regulatory frameworks

The situation unfolding in the Upper Baram is a moral, political, and legal failure. Across multiple levels of regulation, from domestic, federal and state policies to regional and international frameworks, the actions of the Sarawak government, the Forest Department Sarawak (FDS), and Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd. are incompatible with standards that Malaysia has publicly committed to uphold. Taken together, **these failures reveal a pattern in which legal protections that exist on paper have been routinely circumvented in practice**, leaving communities without the safeguards or remedies those frameworks are intended to provide.

Failures of governance

The failure of both FDS and ITTO to uphold basic standards of transparency has left communities facing a profoundly altered political landscape. The consequences extended far beyond the collapse of the UBFA itself. What had begun as a collaborative conservation initiative instead reshaped social relations, governance structures, and daily life in the Upper Baram. As described in section 5.2, Borneoland’s targeted payments had already divided communities into those who benefit from logging and those who oppose it. **Rather than helping to bridge these divisions, government agencies have deepened them – starting with their control over who leads the villages.**

While Sarawak law affirms that communities may elect their own leaders (headmen), in practice, these appointments are subject to government approval – creating incentives for candidates to align with state priorities over local needs. Government-appointed headmen may receive stipends, and development promises hinged on support for state-backed logging or plantation initiatives. This can marginalize customary leaders elected by the community but unrecognized by the government, intensify village divisions, and undermine the legitimacy of community decision-making, particularly in disputes over land and resource governance. The inappropriate appointment of village leaders is inconsistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which Malaysia voted to adopt at the UN General Assembly in 2007.¹⁶¹

Communities are repeatedly told, implicitly or explicitly, that they must choose between aligning with the government, which promises “development” in exchange for extraction, or standing with the NGOs and civil society organizations that have supported community struggles for decades. **Yet these government promises have produced few meaningful development outcomes: no reliable road construction, no equitable infrastructure, and no benefits without sacrificing the forest itself.**

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent and Indigenous rights

The most fundamental failure in the Upper Baram is the denial of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). FPIC is not merely a principle promoted by civil society organizations. It is a core component of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which affirms Indigenous peoples' rights to participate in decisions affecting their lands, territories, and resources.¹⁶²

The Borneoland concession was issued without consultation, notification, or consent from the communities whose customary territories it overlaps. No social or environmental impact assessments, a baseline standard in any development project, were disclosed to affected communities. No meaningful opportunity to object was provided. When communities sought information or attempted to challenge the concession through petitions, formal correspondence, complaints, and legal proceedings, they were met with silence, dismissal, or obstruction.

Sarawak authorities may argue that FPIC obligations do not apply, because the affected area is classified by the state as government land, rather than formally recognized Indigenous territory. Yet this position misconstrues the nature of the right itself. UNDRIP protects Indigenous peoples' traditionally occupied and used territories regardless of whether those territories have been formally titled by the state. Indeed, the systematic failure to recognize NCR territories, combined with highly restrictive pathways to legal recognition, is itself one of the rights concerns that FPIC is designed to address. States cannot avoid consultation obligations simply by refusing to recognize Indigenous tenure.

The manipulation of village government structures to engineer the appearance of consent further compounds this violation. According to community representatives, FDS organized closed-door meetings with government-appointed headmen, urging them to support logging and publicly oppose NGO involvement.¹⁶³ Community members who objected were excluded, threatened, and in some cases forced from their homes.

This process is fundamentally incompatible with the standards set out in UNDRIP. Consent must be freely given, not manufactured through coercion, selective payments, or institutional pressure. Nor can the endorsement of government-appointed headmen substitute for community consent.

UNDRIP requires consent to be obtained through Indigenous peoples' own representative institutions. In the Upper Baram, those institutions are clearly documented as consensus-based.¹⁶⁴ A signature from a state-appointed leader, whose position depends on government approval, and whose community received compensation at rates ten times higher for supporting logging than for opposing it, cannot be taken as evidence of consent.

Business and human rights obligations

In August 2025, Malaysia launched its inaugural National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (NAPBHR) 2025-2030, a framework integrating the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights into domestic policy, regulatory expectations, and corporate conduct guidelines.¹⁶⁵ The NAPBHR explicitly addresses Indigenous rights and the principle of FPIC, requiring businesses and state agencies to engage

communities at an early stage, provide accurate and accessible information, ensure meaningful participation, and prevent coercion in decision-making processes.

The framework also commits Malaysia to strengthening environmental governance, protecting constitutional rights, advancing climate commitments, and preventing forms of greenwashing that misrepresent environmentally harmful activities as sustainable development. Although the NAPBHR was launched after logging operations had begun, the underlying standards it reflects, including FPIC, transparency, environmental protection, and access to remedy, were not new. The framework now provides a formal national benchmark against which the actions of both public authorities and private companies should now be measured. In this respect, the operations of Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd. remain difficult to reconcile with Malaysia's stated business and human rights commitments. Communities were not informed, participation beyond government-appointed leadership was absent, environmental information was withheld, and concerns raised by affected residents were repeatedly ignored.

Transparency, access to information, and public participation

Central to the governance failures documented in this report is the systematic withholding of information, including concession maps, management plans, environmental and social impact assessments, and the timber license itself, from the communities, donors, and civil society organizations who requested it. The result was a situation in which communities were expected to accept decisions affecting their territories without access to the most basic information necessary to understand, evaluate, or challenge them.

This opacity is structurally enabled by the absence of freedom of information legislation in Malaysia.¹⁶⁶ Malaysia remains one of a shrinking number of countries without a comprehensive federal freedom of information law. The refusal to disclose key documents has also prevented meaningful public scrutiny, independent monitoring, and accountability. Communities, project donors, civil society organizations, and even other project stakeholders were repeatedly denied access to information that would have allowed them to understand the scope of the concession, assess its impacts, or challenge its legality. This lack of transparency was not incidental; it was a necessary precondition for the concession's allocation and the subsequent dismantling of the UBFA project. Had information been disclosed from the outset, communities would have been able to contest decisions affecting their territories long before logging operations began.

Environmental commitments and forest governance

The situation in the Upper Baram also stands in tension with a growing body of regional environmental commitments that Malaysia has publicly endorsed. Most notably, Malaysia was among the ASEAN member states that adopted the ASEAN Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment at the 47th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in October 2025.¹⁶⁷ The declaration recognizes that all people are entitled to live in an environment capable of supporting their health, well-being, livelihoods, culture, and development. It further commits ASEAN governments to strengthen environmental governance, improve transparency and public participation in environmental decision-making, protect biodiversity and ecosystems, and ensure access to environmental information and remedies.

While the declaration is not legally binding, it establishes a clear regional standard against which government actions can be evaluated. The events documented in the Baram Peace Park run counter to many of these commitments. The declaration emphasizes the importance of protecting environmental defenders and ensuring that individuals and communities can participate in environmental governance without intimidation or retaliation. Yet community members who opposed the concession reported harassment, threats, exclusion from decision-making processes, and pressure to support logging activities. Rather than strengthening participation, state agencies and company representatives appear to have fostered conditions that deepened divisions within communities and weakened their ability to collectively advocate for their interests.

The concession likewise sits uneasily alongside Sarawak's own public commitments regarding sustainable forest management. Since the announcement of a moratorium on new timber licences in 2016, successive state governments have promoted certification, sustainability standards, and responsible forest governance as cornerstones of Sarawak's environmental agenda. State officials have repeatedly highlighted the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS) as evidence of Sarawak's commitment to sustainable timber production and have pledged that long-term timber concessions would ultimately be certified. Yet the Borneoland concession appears to operate outside any recognized certification framework, despite being located within one of the state's most environmentally sensitive forest landscapes.

“If this department is truly committed to sustainable forest management as often stated in official policies and principles such as the Malaysian Approach to Sustainable Forest Management, why is forest damage (mostly natural forests) still occurring on such a large scale by Borneoland?”

– William, Long Moh

The allocation of an uncertified concession within the Baram Peace Park landscape raises serious questions about the consistency of Sarawak's forest governance policies and the credibility of its environmental commitments. It also directly contradicts Malaysia's broader obligations under international climate and biodiversity frameworks, which increasingly recognize the critical importance of intact tropical forests for carbon storage, biodiversity conservation, watershed protection, and climate resilience. **Primary forests such as those found in the Upper Baram cannot be replaced once lost; their ecological value is the product of centuries of uninterrupted forest development.**

The concerns raised by communities in the Upper Baram are not isolated. They reflect broader debates unfolding throughout Malaysia regarding Indigenous rights, environmental governance, transparency, and climate justice. In recent years, civil society organizations, researchers, and affected communities have increasingly challenged the gap between environmental commitments made in policy documents and their implementation on the ground. The controversy surrounding the Borneoland concession demonstrates how easily commitments to sustainability can be undermined when transparency is absent, accountability mechanisms fail, and affected communities are excluded from decisions that fundamentally affect their futures.

7. Conclusion and demands

For more than four decades, Indigenous communities in the Upper Baram have resisted the steady advance of industrial logging into their ancestral forests. Since the 1980s, Indigenous communities have organized blockades, documented encroachment, and asserted their rights to the forests that have sustained them for generations. This long history of resistance is the foundation upon which every subsequent conservation effort in Upper Baram has been built.

The vision of the Penan Peace Park, and later the Baram Peace Park, emerged from this history: a community-led effort to secure lasting protection for one of the last remaining primary forest landscapes in Sarawak. When the Upper Baram Forest Area (UBFA) project was introduced by the government as an adoption of the Baram Peace Park and endorsed by the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), it appeared to signal a long-awaited shift. For the first time in decades of resistance, there was an alignment, at least on paper, between Indigenous governance, state recognition, and international support. The project was framed as a model through which Sarawak could meet its climate and sustainability commitments while recognizing the role of Indigenous communities as stewards of their own territories. **That promise has now been broken.**

While the UBFA project was being developed and promoted, a parallel process unfolded out of public view. A new timber concession was allocated over the same forest area, without disclosure, without consultation, and without consent. Communities who sought information were met with silence. Civil society organizations and donors to the UBFA project raised concerns and received no response. Even as logging activity began to reappear on the ground – roads cut into forests, machinery advancing toward Gunung Murud Kecil, and truck after truck carrying tons of timber left the area – official statements denied that any such operations were taking place. When the existence of the logging concession could no longer be concealed, the UBFA project itself was abruptly cancelled by the FDS. The Sarawak government and ITTO deflected responsibility, claiming that NGO and community advocacy had disrupted the process. **There has been no accountability for the decisions made, nor for the impacts that have followed.**

The failure of government and international oversight mechanisms is stark. ITTO was positioned as a guarantor of transparency and accountability within the UBFA, yet it did not intervene as the project's core objectives were altered and ultimately abandoned. This inaction is particularly concerning given the structural lack of independence at ITTO's highest level of leadership; its Executive Director, Sheam Satkuru, has a track record of significant ties to the Malaysian timber sector. Rather than acting as an independent safeguard, **ITTO appears to have enabled the quiet repurposing of an Indigenous-led conservation initiative into a state-appropriated framework compatible with industrial large-scale logging.**

What followed is the continuation of a well-established pattern in Sarawak, dating back to the legacy of its long-time Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, whose rule was marked by the large-scale destruction of the state's primary forests. Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd., a politically connected company, was granted a large-scale concession under opaque conditions. On the ground, logging operations rapidly resumed in areas that had remained relatively undisturbed in recent years, including in areas that formed the core protection zone of the Baram Peace Park.

The community of Ba Data Bila has become the focal point of this shift. Here, the return of industrial logging has triggered not just environmental devastation, affecting rivers, wildlife habitats, and cultural-ecological sites, but also deep social fractures. The introduction of selective payments, the promises of development, and state-backed authority has created divisions within communities, weakening collective resistance and enabling operations to proceed.

The coercive development now underway in the Upper Baram is not an isolated local dispute. It reflects a systemic pattern rooted in Sarawak's Taib-era model of extractive forest governance, now being reproduced under the political leadership of current Premier Abang Johari.

The Baram Peace Park was a collaborative, Indigenous community-led attempt to prevent the continued loss of Indigenous forests. At the hands of the Sarawak government and ITTO, it was instead used to legitimize the return of logging into the very forests it was meant to protect.

Despite these conditions, many continue to resist. Through petitions, blockades, legal action, and repeated appeals to national and international bodies, Upper Baram residents have consistently asserted their rights and demanded accountability. But resistance alone cannot offset the structural imbalance they face. Without external scrutiny and pressure, the current trajectory is likely to continue. What continued resistance shows is that a community-led movement is not so easily dismantled. The UBFA may have been abandoned, but the decades-long vision of a Baram Peace Park still lives on.

The message of that resistance is clear and urgent, and community representatives have articulated the following demands:

1. Borneoland Timber Resources: Halt all logging activities immediately

All logging operations within the Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd. concession must be immediately suspended. Continued extraction amid unresolved legal challenges, well-documented environmental damage, and the absence of community consent only deepens harm and forecloses the possibility of meaningful accountability. A halt is necessary to prevent further destruction and to allow for independent verification of impacts and compliance.

2. Sarawak Government: Revoke Borneoland Timber Resources' license

The concession awarded to Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd. must be revoked, or at minimum subjected to a transparent and independent review shared with the public. The conditions under which it was granted – without public tender, without consultation, and without disclosure – raise serious concerns regarding its legality and legitimacy. Any continuation of operations under such conditions undermines both domestic policy commitments and international standards.

3. Sarawak Government: Fulfil the promises of the Baram Peace Park

The commitments made under the Baram Peace Park and UBFA processes must be reinstated and honored. This includes the protection of the project's core primary forest areas identified for conservation

and the recognition of Indigenous governance systems as central to that protection. Rebuilding trust requires concrete action to restore what was promised and subsequently withdrawn.

4. Japanese Government and Japanese timber trading companies: Prohibit the purchases of Sarawak timber amid the pending investigation

The Japanese companies importing Sarawak timber should immediately suspend purchases originating from the Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd. concession and any associated operations until an independent investigation has determined whether the concession was lawfully issued, the possible human rights violations have been addressed, and whether logging activities comply with domestic and international standards. Continued purchases risk creating a market for timber linked to disputed Indigenous territories, environmental destruction - especially of primary forest, and serious governance failures. As one of the principal export destinations for Sarawak timber, the Japanese government and timber trading companies have both the leverage and responsibility to ensure that its supply chains are not contributing to these harms.

5. Japanese Government: Suspend ITTO funding in Sarawak until allegations are independently investigated

The Japanese government should immediately commission an independent review of the cancellation of the Upper Baram Forest Area (UBFA) project and an independent investigation into the logging activities taking place within the former project area. Until these investigations are completed and their findings made public, the Japanese government should suspend all funding for ITTO projects in Sarawak.

6. Shin Yang: Cease sourcing and processing timber from Borneoland

Shin Yang should immediately cease purchasing, processing, and trading timber sourced from Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd.. The company should publicly disclose the nature and extent of its business relationship with Borneoland Timber Resources Sdn. Bhd., including the origin and volume of timber purchased, and explain the due diligence measures it has undertaken to ensure compliance with its human rights and environmental responsibilities.

7. Sarawak Government: Implement a zero-tolerance Free, Prior, and Informed Consent policy

The events documented in this report demonstrate that existing consultation processes are inadequate and easily manipulated. The Sarawak government must establish and enforce a clear framework guaranteeing Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) for all projects affecting Indigenous lands, territories, and resources. Consent must be obtained before concessions are issued, based on full disclosure of relevant information, and through processes that are free from coercion, political pressure, intimidation, or the

manipulation of community leadership structures. Decisions affecting Indigenous territories should not proceed without demonstrable community consent.

8. Sarawak Government: Permanently protect the Upper Baram's forests

Long-term protection of the Upper Baram forests must be secured through legally recognized mechanisms that uphold Indigenous land rights and enforce Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). This includes transparent land-use planning, independent monitoring, and safeguards against future concession allocations in contested areas. Protection must extend not only to the forest itself, but to the communities whose livelihoods, cultures, and identities are inseparable from it.

The situation in the Upper Baram is a litmus test, not only of Sarawak's stated commitment to sustainability, but also of the broader systems that claim to govern and protect the world's remaining tropical forests. If a project framed as a model of community-led conservation can be repurposed into a vehicle for renewed logging without consequence, then the credibility of those systems is fundamentally in question. For the communities of the Upper Baram, the stakes are much more immediate: the resources that have sustained generations of Indigenous people are systematically destroyed. Their continued resistance makes it equally clear that the outcome is not yet fixed, **but only if these demands are taken seriously and acted on without delay.**

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