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SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE

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ABSTRACT

Seventeen village communities within and around the limestone hill complex south of Bau Town were the subjects of a baseline socioeconomic study. The main objective of the study was to assess the economic significance of the limestone forest complex to the local communities. A total of 198 household heads were sampled and surveyed based on a set of structured questionnaire; local leaders were also interviewed separately to obtain information common to each community studied. The results indicated that the majority of the village households were farmers either operating on a part-time or full-time basis. About 30% of these sampled households owned land rights at the base of the limestone hills. A significant proportion of the community depended on the forest for various purposes. Both plant and animal resources were harvested from the forest, mainly for personal uses although some produce was sold to the market. The most important produce from the limestone area was that of birds' nests. Some 65% of the sampled households were involved or had share in the collection and sale of the produce. The community's response to the proposal to put the limestone areas into conservation use was mixed. While they supported the idea of conservation in general, they were also concerned that it would affect their existing right of access to the forest, which they regarded as their traditional domain. Ecotourism development was viewed positively as an activity compatible with conservation but forecasted to be less beneficial to the local communities compared to commercial tour operators.

Keywords: limestone, natural resource, forest products, community perception

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INTRODUCTION

The Bau Limestone Area can be geographically defined to include the whole stretch of limestone formation in the southern portion of Kuching Division. It stretches from Kampong Opar in Bau to as far south as the Indonesian border to include the Mambong-Bengoh-Braang-Krian areas in the eastern

and southern portions of Kuching Division. The importance of the limestone forests in Bau and surrounding areas has not been fully documented. Most of these limestone hill forests are still relatively undisturbed compared to the more accessible foothills. Many of these hills are still held under mining leases. Most of the forested areas not covered under any mining lease, however, are too steep or too stony and are unsuitable for cultivation. On the foothills, these forests provide fertile farming lands for the local village residents who are mainly farmers. Most of these cultivated foothill flats are held under Native Customary Rights (NCR) and thus belong to the native communities. In the more urban and sub-urban areas, the lands are categorised as Mixed-Zone Land (MZL) and are owned by ethnic Chinese community. These mixed zone lands are currently used for farming, residential and urban purposes.

The limestone forests and hills in Bau stand to be one of the state's most valuable cultural heritage. Given the changes in land use, these natural beauties will be lost to development if not protected. Proper management of these areas will not only ensure the sustainability of the rich biodiversity, but also become a valuable tourism asset once it is planned and managed as such. Regulation of use for these forests will also ensure sustainable supply of minor forest products. These minor forest products are important component of the villagers' source of food and extra income.

Background to the study

The gradual realisation of the limestone forests around Bau as an important common resource (either biological, cultural or economic) which need to be conserved has drawn some interest from both the local communities and from outside. The area is said to contain rich fauna and flora resources. The rich diversity of plant and animal lives may be unique and a call for the conservation is timely.

While biological resources may be the main reason for the proposal for conservation, the economic and cultural importance of these forests is as important and may even be critical. In the past, the mineral resources (limestone, antimony, gold) were the most obvious economic significance of the area. However, the area supports a more diverse set of economic activities. These include farming, collection of timber for home construction, collection of wild plant produce (for food and medicinal purposes), collection of wild fruits, and management and collection of birds' nests. The limestone forests also serve as catchment areas for gravity-feed water supply systems that supply water to most of the nearby villages. There are also records of specific locations in the mass of limestone forests that are being used as native burial grounds, shrines and other cultural or religious activities.

Another significant aspect of the limestone forest area in Bau is related to tenure. While these areas may appear to be state owned, the ethnic Bidayuh, as mentioned earlier, use most of the accessible areas. It is eminent, therefore, that they have established native customary rights to the land. Their use and management of these forests may not be obvious to the outsiders. Management and use of these forests are 'custodial' in nature and tend to be governed by the local customs and 'adat'.

Before any effort is made to conserve any parts of the limestone areas, a thorough study is needed to collect valuable information, which will be used as baseline data for planning, management and policy development related to the proposed conservation area.

Objectives

The general purpose of this study was to collect important key information related to communities in and around the limestone forest areas near Bau. Specifically, the objectives of this study were:

1. to collect socio-demographic information on communities in and around the limestone forest areas in Bau;
2. to determine the key economic and cultural activities in the area and to ascertain their impacts or relationships to the limestone forests;
3. to determine the significance or importance of the limestone forests to the local communities in terms of existing economic contribution, and subsequently to assess the future potentials for conservation and tourism;
4. to assess local awareness and attitudes towards conservation of natural resources including land, forests, water, flora and fauna components; and
5. to assess local attitudes and perceptions on various aspects and alternatives of impending conservation efforts, and perhaps tourism development in the area.

METHODOLOGY

Study site

The study was focused in the Bau area covering communities near Bau Town and all villages in and surrounding the limestone forests. On the southwestern side of Bau the key villages include Tai Ton, Boring, Bidi, Krokong, Batu Sepit, Plaman Kam, Puak, Pisa and Peros. On the southeastern side of Bau, the villages include Skiat Lama, Skiat Baru, Jambusan, Simpang Tiga, Seromah, Segubang, Seropak, and Merembbeh. It