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THE ECOLOGY OF CROCODILE ATTACKS IN BATANG LUPAR, SARAWAK

Robert Stuebing, Ghazally Ismail and Kusuadi Sallih

Introduction and Background

Crocodiles and the river people of Sarawak have shared the same environment for many millenia, and for the most part have coexisted peacefully. There were relatively few human deaths, while few crocodiles were in turn killed due to pantang (taboos) and generally inefficient hunting methods. The advent of firearms gave humans the ultimate advantage. Subsequent hunting, particularly over the last several decades, has reduced crocodile populations rather substantially. Attacks on man have thus declined dramatically or ceased entirely along most Sarawak rivers. In the Lupar River however, crocodile attacks have remained relatively frequent. Residents in fact believe that a fatality is to be expected at least once a year. Actual data indicate a somewhat lower rate of occurrence (see Table 1) though crocodile-related deaths are still regarded as a serious problem by local authorities. Non-fatal incidents are even more common (DSP Abang Adris, pers. comm.). Attacks on man elsewhere in Sarawak such as the fatal incident on the Belawai River in August, 1982, are extraordinary events. As a result, traditional explanations such as the existence of spirit or ghost crocodiles (*buaya puaka*) are often relied upon to explain why Batang Lupar alone seems to enjoy such an unsavoury reputation. An ecological approach was suggested by Stuebing (1983), but until recently no such study has been attempted.

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Batang Lupar while not the longest, is probably Sarawak's largest river (see Fig. 1.). Though perhaps only half a kilometre wide near Bandar Sri Aman, it meanders through the vast alluvial plain of the Second Division eventually attaining a maximum width of approximately five kilometres near Batu Triso. Though broad along its lower portions, the Batang Lupar is rather shallow to the extent that it is usually not navigable at low tide. The banks consists mainly of muds mixed with fine sand which are continuously eroded due to the action of floods and a tidal bore. The latter sweeps upriver twice daily from Lingga to Liu as far as seventy kilometres upstream (Komori, 1979). The turbulence and subsequent erosion have created a river profile of shallow, gently sloping banks particularly along convex portions of river bends. Turbidity also remains high virtually year round.

Table I: Recent Fatal Crocodile Attack in Sarawak.

Date	Location	Person Attacked	Activity	Time of Day	State of Tide	Phase of Moon	Details of Attack	Description of Crocodile
9.6.75	Mouth of Sungai Nibong Sebuyau	Minot ak Kima (F)	—	—	(High water approx. 1600 hrs)	new	—	—
1.7.75	Tanjung Bijat, Batang Lupar	Bilai ak Mijie (M)	—	—	(High water approx. 1030 hrs)	last quarter	—	—
14.1.79	Kampong Bakong, Batang Lupar	Mik bin Ibrahim (M)	—	—	(High water approx. 1700 hrs)	full	—	—
26.6.82	Sungai Batang Lupar	Bagan ak Pali (M)	Catching prawns in shallow water	1600 hrs	Low tide (High water approx. 1000 hrs)	new	Stepped on Crocodile in shallow water	White backed, longer than 6 metres,
2.8.82	Near Sebayang, Sg. Belawai	Abong ak Gelayang (M)	Paddling sampan	1700 hrs	High tide (High water approx. 1500 hrs)	full	Sampan overturned, victim drowned	"large"
27.9.84	Tanjung Bijat, Batang Lupar	Badong ak Apong (M)	Catching prawns in shallow water	Approx. 1400 hrs	Low tide (High water approx. 1945 hrs)	new	Sampan overturned, victim seized	White-backed, "large"