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RIVER, FOREST AND MOUNTAIN: THE PENAN GANG LANDSCAPE

J. Peter Brosius

INTRODUCTION

A concern with development is today pervasive in Sarawak. A recurrent theme in discussions of policy is how this development can be "brought to" upriver peoples, those still maintaining subsistence-level economies. Of great concern for development planners has been how to deal with the category of peoples called Penan, most of whom, until recently, followed a hunting and gathering mode of subsistence. As yet, no set policy exists for directing government development efforts to Penan, but rapidly changing circumstances in upriver areas are creating conditions with regard to which difficult decisions must soon be made.

Such decisions must weigh the welfare of Penan peoples against state-level economic and environmental priorities. Invariably, these decisions involve the issue of land use and resources. Such decisions require an accurate understanding of Penan land and resource use. This is a matter of particular urgency with regard to Penan: more than any other people in Sarawak, the way Penan are viewed is distorted by a number of misconceptions. The popular view is that of a people who wander endlessly, perhaps aimlessly, through the trackless depths of the forest in search of food, living a hand to mouth existence. The impression is one of a people without history and without a sense of place. Such a view is mistaken.

In the following discussion I examine the use of land and resources in a particular Penan community, the Penan Gang of Long Jek,¹ along the Seping River in the Belaga District, Seventh Division. It is not my intention here to present a comprehensive ethnography of the Penan Gang of Penan in Sarawak in general. Given the present concern with development policy, the following discussion will proceed on a general level, presenting a brief overview of Penan land and resource use, and highlighting those aspects relevant to the formulation of development policy.²

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THE PENAN GANG

The Belaga District is characterized by mountainous terrain, and is still largely forest covered. The majority of the population — Kayan, Kenyah, Kajang and other longhouse-dwelling groups — are mostly settled along the banks of the Balui and its larger tributary rivers.³ The Penan, in contrast, are mostly to be found in the upper sections of Balui tributaries: the Belaga, Seping, Plieran, Danum and Linau Rivers. Langub (1974, 1975) and Nicolaisen (1980) provide overviews of the location and status of Penan in the District.