

A Sunday in Tembak

Outside is the sound of flowing water mixed with that of crickets and Cicadas. The house of pak Nayau in the remote Tembak village has its energy efficient lights on in the simple wooden living room and also the clean water entering his pond and bathroom can flow freely during the night, for both come from the nearby forest. The river does what it always does, creating and following its path while driving a small water wheel that drives a simple dynamo installed by the villagers themselves. It is 2 am and the remote village of Tembak is sound asleep. I am listening to the sound of my own typing on the keyboard. Through the window with the cool breeze of the night I watch the full moon and the many countless stars that still visibly carpet the night sky despite the bright pedigree moon.

I sneaked out from the mosquito net that I share with Jean Kern in the small sleeping room cluttered with bags and gear. I have slept two hours but woke up with the urge to write down my notes of this nice Sunday that just passed. I spent it with some of the eco-warriors and three elders of the village that still have the know-how about the richness of the forest. And I learned so much again from them, like how to use the bark of *Scorodocarpus borneensis* (Kulim) as a spice, and that you can eat its leaves and roast its fruits! And an incredible plant that for most people tastes a pleasant spicy sweet that has potential as a natural sweetener! And, and, and....

So after jotting down some 120 observations and the many interesting Dayak traditions they told me about during some 11 hours together in the forest and then at the terrace above the pond in the house of pak Nyat, as well as trying to review the many ornamental plants I encountered today of which I suspect two to be species new to science, I find myself no longer sleepy. So why not write another little blog for the wonderful people that allow me to do work here in Tembak, a village that I believe can still truly become a sustainable village. It is already a happy village with a wonderful tradition of togetherness and clear playing rules. And we are here trying to help them because they made a stand, first against the mighty Barito timber group of the old Suharto group in Jakarta, and later several times against the oil palm companies that now surround their happy village and are coming closer by the day. That is why today we could walk many hours in a magnificent forest that until few years ago still harbored many orangutans and even rhinos.

Where to start this Sunday in Tembak... Perhaps I should begin at the evening before. I was speaking to the ecowarriors of DeforestAction and several supporters of the program that came to visit us, explaining about the planning needed to secure the nearby forest forever for orangutan conservation. I explained what kind of information we need to achieve the protection of this site for releases of all kinds of animals and the issue came up of the field surveys. Eco-warrior Paul Daley, a young Australian nursery expert came up with the remark, that it would be his best birthday present if we could go into the original rainforest to do that survey like... the next morning, at his Birthday. So I checked around, and pak Nayau, an amazing networker and organizer, in whose house I

stay, went to work and as always magically things fell into place. On Sunday morning we left with a full pick up load of excited eco-warriors and some Tembak village elders for the village of Arai Landau, meaning a flat place with much water, to start our exploration of the Condong forest. From there a group of 25 people started the climb... Target: decide whether the Condong forest is suitable to build the release site for the orangutans of the Kobus Foundation and Ministry of Forestry cooperation.

First we walked past vegetable gardens, then agroforests with some big sugar palms mixed in them! Then fruit trees mixed with the large Tengkawang trees. Tengkawang trees are tropical hardwood species belonging to the family of the Merantis. Their wood once made up more than 25% of all the traded tropical hardwoods worldwide. Now few of these stands remain and production has virtually halted. Tengkawang trees produce a large harvest of very big fat containing seeds once every three or four years during so-called mass flowering seasons. This fat, in the past known as Borneo tallow, is much healthier than that of oil palms and can be stored for more than ten years without losing its quality.

Then more and more shrub forest, some burned fields for dryland slash and burn rice cultivation and lots and lots of rubber forests. Rubber is the main source of income for these villages. The Arai village has most rubber, being the oldest village on the land that was given to this Dayak Seberuang tribe for helping the Malay people of Sekadau in their fight with approaching enemies. Everyone here is related. I must have been introduced to at least 300 brothers, fathers, grandfathers, nephews and other relatives of pak Nayau! No chance to keep track of that! Everywhere we walk pak Nayau points out whose land is where and from whom it was inherited. It is criminal that these oil palm concessions come in and bulldoze the Dayak land that has been cultivated for centuries because there is no legal paper issued by the new central government from Java so it has no owner!!!

We pass by clean rivers and cross many rocks and fallen trees to reach the next slope to climb. The further we go the steeper it gets and the more original forest species I note. Pak Apui has warned me before that his legs are not so good anymore and that he and pak Nyat may have to abandon us before reaching the caves or the forest at the top of the Condong Mountain. But these two forest experts are shining and smiling! We talk about the many useful plants, I hear about how the timber company found out that the hunting trails of pak Nyat were the best way to construct roads to get to the timber, and they tell me about all the animals that once lived here.

Both men are now in their sixties and there is really no one of the younger generation that still has their skills. Agung, Apui's son, is doing his best but he has migraines that have been haunting him since the last ten years, explaining the silent tears and squeezed eyes at frequent occasions. Agung works a lot with my forestry student from The Netherlands Bram who dutifully writes down as much as he can while we take in the richness of knowledge of the forest from these old hunter trackers. He walks barefoot just like the Dayak and has done a great job at learning Indonesian in the short time he is in the Tembak village.

Pak Apui tells about the song of a bird we hear. Almost gone he explains. There used to be so many of those Kutilang birds here in the forest but now they are almost extinct. They rest along the streams and the Javanese people, with their little cassette recorders with their song and nets, followed all of these small rivers and caught them all to send them to Java to be sold to rich people there. Pak Nyat tells about the mighty hornbills that flew here in flocks of hundreds. There still are some but the sight of the mighty flocks with their swooshing wings is something of the past that only lives in their memories.

But I also hear more seriously disturbing things... How they both were avid hunters. And about the countless deer they would hunt at the Sepan. A Sepan is a mudflat where salt water trickles from the rocks and where many animals come to get their important minerals. Ideal for the orangutans we want to release here! Now there are very few deer left, because too many people started hunting there to feed the illegal gold miners at the other side of the mountains. That explains also the good condition of the path we are following. People from Arai use it to bring vegetables to the gold seekers. So sadly very soon I already know that we will not be able to start the releases of orangutans from Tembak here in the Condong forest. They would try to take vegetables from the passing women and children that every day walk this path. We meet a woman and her little son at a crystal clear river with lots of plastic of candy wrappers nearby. She just came back from the 7-hour walk.

Pak Nyat tells at the resting place along the river about a big tree in front of us. He shows where he climbed up the tree along the vines and approached an orangutan on its nest up to three meters before it would move into the next tree looking at him in amazement. The elder of Arai village who accompanies us as guide tells that two weeks ago he still met an orangutan very nearby where we are sitting. Later I see a nest on the climb up that is less than a week old, confirming together with the many fruit trees that this is indeed an orangutan forest.

So what happened to the orangutans I ask? Well the same as the rhinos... We ate them pak Nyat tells me. Rhinos?!!! Yes until a few years ago there were still rhinos living in these mountains. Did you sell the horns? No, there was no one buying them. We would had we known he said. We just tracked them and killed them for their meat... Pak Apui holds me by my arm and says, I only once killed an orangutan. It is not right, they can read our minds, they are persons. But this one time when we went out to collect rattan and our group split up, all of a sudden I heard several gun shots and when I rushed back I saw this mother orangutan with her baby and she was bleeding, seriously wounded by the shots of my friends. I felt to sorry, but I had to release her from her suffering so I shot once and it killed her falling down... Tears are in his eyes...

Pak Apui tells why he does not often come here anymore because we are passing the old logging roads of the Barito concession and when the bulldozers came the forest lost its beauty. And his heart cries when he sees the majestic sacred Condong forest raped. He remembers where the big honey trees stood that were

illegally harvested by the company. Now we pass by the top of a hill with some worthless *Acacia mangium* trees in the middle of the jungle. They planted them to falsely claim all of the big valuable trees on these ridges. Corruption. Everywhere. But pak Apui also tells me he is happy to walk in the forest with me and that we can share like they do amongst each other. I am listening in amazement at our resting spot where the three wise men are exchanging information on the trees, animals, the old paths, the old stories. I try to explain a few of the incredible details to the eco-warriors but none of them seems interested. They are tired of the steep walk and after this spot the first people start giving up to keep up with the group and decide to return. I feel still remarkably fit after a week in the hospital just a few days ago.

Then we start the climb to the peak of Condong. Condong is a mountain of 860 meters high of which the last 400 stands out like a giant rock pillar with vertical sides and a pluck of forest on its top. First we have to collect sticks before approaching the holy rocks. There we see hundreds of sticks placed against a huge overhanging rock. Symbolically we ask the gods here to let the rocks stand up and not fall upon us. Excited our guide comes with a lot of strange plants. We taste and indeed, wonderfully spicy sweet! They use it to cook their meat with and as a sweetener for coffee when they run out of sugar. This is a very interesting discovery... We collect cuttings to plant in the village. I have no idea even about the family to which this plant might belong!

After several hundred more meters of climbing most of the group have to give up. Rocks that get pulled loose roll a hundred meter down the steep slopes and the mud gives very little grip, especially when you are not walking barefoot and can grip in the mud with your toes. Fahrani, the Indonesian model who is one of the eco-warriors is very strong and continues. I take pictures with pak Apui who seems as healthy as a young warrior now and who climbs in the trees to chew on his bethel nut and enjoy the view over vast areas of virgin forest. He is sooo happy! Ecowarriors Paul and Tom join him in chewing Bethel nut asking me about *Psilocybe* mushrooms but I see none in the forest.

With only my student Bram and two of the eco-warrior entourage left we reach, climbing almost vertically from root to stem to rock, the back side of the ridge. A short pause. I am now really tired but our guide is rushing off ahead with pak Apui towards the top of the Condong peak. Later I catch up with Fahrani and Christie where the ridge is getting so small and steep that they do not want to go further. Pak Apui is sitting in a tree above a 400 meter free drop and chews more Bethel nut. He is elated! Pak Nyat has decided to wait for me at the cave with the millions of bats at the foot of the peak. All my strength now comes from my arms and I climb over a very dangerous spot with great difficulty. There is no soil here, we walk on a moving floating carpet of roots and litter with the risk of stepping through at any time...

Then the last challenge, a huge rock. I have to flatten myself and curse myself for my stomach that forces me to move my point of gravity almost beyond the less than a foot wide ridge that I have to pass holding my arms along the wet rocks. The breeze here is cold and the drop is spectacular. I notice special *Berberis*

plants and special mosses. There is even a kind of *Casuarina* tree growing here in the mist. Pak Apui returns, Bram keeps up with me and notices a beautiful dwarf pitcher plant. I have looked at the *Nepenthes* genus before and I cannot recall ever having seen this species! Beautiful. We take a cutting to carry back with us. Then finally, we reach the top. The local Dayak guide and the people that carried our lunch and water are already there. The forest is very low here and I do not know the species. There are so many new species still to be discovered from those unique habitats. We take some pictures of the conquerors and the views then we hurry to catch up with the others that have returned earlier.

On the way down it is not easy either. We pass by a small cave but nobody seems to know where the big cave is and where pak Nyat is. Then we visit a kind of Maria cave for the Catholic youth. After that we move on fast through very wet places to reconnect with the group and walk the long trail back to the village. Finally there in Arai village I really feel exhausted but pak Nyat is awaiting me with coffee. With sugar which is just fine for this time and needed! Back on the pick up and muddy roads to Tembak and Christie is praised by the Dayak for coming back so clean! She must be very strong!

In the Tembak village we eat and talk with pak Nyat about everything I have seen. I check out some plants and the nursery with Bram. Pak Apui has trouble walking now but gets some balsam that improves his leg condition a lot. Jean Kern is getting a Dayak massage. Then an invitation! The eco-warriors that did not join us on the expedition have built a Birthday party for Paul Daley at one of the local stalls. Beautifully decorated, music system and computer set up and even some drinks from abroad. Fully recovered I join them for some reggae dancing until I feel the urge to start my botanical and other notes and finally write this little blog about a nice Sunday in Tembak.

Willie Smits

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