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KUCHING, May 22 (Bernama) -- Mount Singai is visible from Kuching and the hill was once the home to seven Bidayuh villages whose inhabitants were known as "Bisingai" or literally the people of Singai.

Located about 30 kilometres south of Kuching, the base of the 333.3 metre (1,000-ft) high hill can be reached by tarred road through Batu Kawa here while its flat top can be accessed via the jungle trail once used by the villagers.

One of the former Bisingai community leaders, Orang Kaya Pemanca Durin was even part of the Sarawak team that went to London in 1963 to negotiate the formation of Malaysia together with Malaya, North Borneo and Singapore. However, in the 1970s the community moved to the foothill where their farms were located and established 12 new villages.

The only reminder of the early settlements on the hill are broken bottles, jars, kitchen utensils and some belian stumps and pillars, and where the houses once stood are now overgrown with secondary vegetation.

Today, the hill is occupied by Catholic Memorial Pilgrimage Centre (CMPC) and the Association of Research and Development of Singai Sarawak (Redeems) Centre at Kampung Apar. CMPC over the last 20 years have been drawing pilgrims and visitors to the hill while Redeems is a popular venue for the Gawai Dayak carnival.

According to Universiti Malaysia Sarawak's (Unimas) Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation Director Professor Andrew Alek Tuen, the Binsingai people there probably originated from Central Kalimantan several hundred years ago.

Nevertheless Andrew, a local boy from Kampung Tanjong Bowang near here, said the hill remained close to the hearts of the locals who continue with planting, harvesting, collecting and hunting activities till today.

HIGH ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Ever since the first mini expedition to Mount Singai in 2010 to study the natural resources, the academician from Unimas' Resource Science and Technology Faculty has been returning to the hill most weekends for research, recreational, social and personal reasons.

He truly believes that the community forest of Singai is worth conserving due to its valuable social and ecological attributes.

At a recent talk entitled "Conservation Value of Mount Singai - People, Culture and Natural Resources," he suggested that in preserving the social attributes Redeems and Unimas could potentially play a significant role in educating and raising awareness on the waning traditional way of life of the people, their customs, language and stories, arts and crafts.

The traditional way of life is increasingly threatened and eroded by Western influence brought especially by the television and Internet.

And from the ecological perspective, efforts must be taken to document and preserve the hill's flora and fauna.

THE RICH FAUNA

In terms of flora and fauna, Andrew said studies conducted by Unimas in 2010 recorded at least 30 species of amphibians and 19 species of reptiles. Walking up the trail to CMPC at night one might encounter the Borneo Leafnose Pit Viper and several frog species.

Mount Singai is also the home of more than 100 bird species.

"Some of the interesting birds include the Rufous-backed Kingfisher, whose shrill cry feared by the locals as it is an indication of something bad is to happen in the village, and they also believe the call of Gold-whiskered barbet ("sogu") a sign of a death," he said.

"The Rufous-tailed tailorbird is perhaps the most famous of the augury bird - its call literally dictates whether the villager will go to his farm, go hunting or not," he said.

The emerald dove and its pigeon cousins were not only tasty to eat but were also good pets. Thus, the Bisingai children learned how to set up snares and construct cages to keep these birds that in turn developed a healthy respect for the forest and its wildlife.

Twenty-two species of mammals were also recorded at Mount Singai, including 10 species of bats, seven rodents, four tree shrews and a tarsier.

Up to early 1980s, especially during the durian flowering season large numbers of flying foxes could be seen during dusk coming from the coastal areas to feed on the nectar of durian flowers unlike nowadays where just a handful could be seen as the durian trees had dwindled in numbers.

According to the Sarawak Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1998 the tarsier, bats, kingfishers, woodpeckers, owls and hill myna are categorised as protected animals.

MEDICINAL PROPERTIES

At least about 200 species of plants were recorded along the trail to the top of Mount Singai with 83 plants being identified having medicinal properties based on its use by the Bisingai and other communities in Borneo.

Nineteen types of fruit trees were also recorded along the CMPC trail, the most common was the langsat, followed by durian, tampoi and engkabang, which were planted by the people as they traveled up and down the trail from their longhouse to their farm below.

"Based on their size and from anecdotal information from the elders, some of these trees are probably more than 100 years old," he said, noting that the tapang trees or "do-oh" in Bisingai language are the giants of the forest of Mount Singai, towering about 50 meters above ground.

Easily recognized from a distance due to its light coloured small leaves and a rounded canopy, the tapang was once favoured by honey bees for nesting. However, sadly, the trees have been "barren" for the last 20 years and even if there were plenty of bees the skill to construct the bamboo ladder or "tatok" to reach the hives has now been lost among the younger generation, he said.

Other useful plants include the rattan which the people used to weave baskets and mats, and bamboo that is used for constructing bridges, platforms, and making 'tatok', water containers, water channels, bird cages, and spine for atap roof. The young bamboo shoots are also eaten.

The sap palm is a source of toddy while its fibre is weaved into twine, which can last longer than rattan.

Studies by Unimas conducted in 2010 also showed the water quality of several streams in Singai to be good, conforming to Class IIA of the National Water Quality Standards for Malaysia and regarded suitable for potable use upon conventional treatment.

"I can remember collecting water from three of these water channels or "oyak" connected to the streams, using bamboo containers when I was small and the "oyak" never seem to dry up during those times," he recalled.

The many streams that originated half-way up Mount Singai, slightly above the old villages have become the source of water that sustained the people before piped water was available.

The right attitude, good behavior and respect for elders and environment, however, need to be inculcated from a tender age and the primary schools in the villages, teachers, parents and community leaders all play an important role in conserving the ecological and social attributes of Mount Singai.

*extracted from **bernama**
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