

# GAZETTING BUKIT SARANG AND BINYO PENYILAM AS NATIONAL PARKS

MySarawak

## Backgrounds of the two proposed areas

DO you love nature and photography? Do you like flora such as pitcher plants and wild orchids or do you love fishing or even caving? If you do, then you might want to put down these two new places — Bukit Sarang and Binyo Penyilam — in your personal notebook.

Apart from the oil and gas industry, little is known about Bintulu's unique forests and landscapes.

Bukit Sarang and Binyo Penyilam are two unique forest landscapes, located in the Bintulu region of Sarawak. Both areas are well-known for their rich natural resources. Binyo is a breeding ground for fish, especially Tapah (*wallago leerii*), while Bukit Sarang is known for natural bird's nests and limestone caves.

Apart from these highly valued commercial resources, little is known about what these areas have to offer. Hence, it is important to know both are now undergoing transformation into National Parks.

Currently coming under the Planted Forest Project is an industrial tree plantation area covering Binyo and Bukit Sarang. Both are considered as conservation areas which are important for the unique landscapes as well as the rare, threatened or endangered species.

“The gazettement of both areas as National Parks will further enhance the protection of the biodiversity and recognise the importance of the areas as a reservoir for some rare, threatened or endangered species, including some new species” said Joanes Unggang, conservation manager for GP Pusaka, and leader of group of experts in biodiversity inventories in the areas concerned.

Research and inventory works in both areas have begun since 2004 and are on-going today in collaboration with numerous researchers from local and international institutions such as Smithsonian Institution, USA; Lund University, Sweden; National University of Singapore (RMBR); Nanyang Technological University; University of Canterbury, New Zealand; UNIMAS (Kuching); UTAR (Kuala Lumpur), Singapore Herbarium and AFSID, SFC.

“We're not only conserving these two areas under our project but also connecting them with the largest existing wildlife corridor in Sarawak called the Bukit Mina Wildlife Corridor.

“The purpose is to have a virtual connectivity between the two areas for conservation. It’s the first of its kind in Sarawak. Everything is already in place and ready for legal protection,” Joanes added on the key conservation works in the Planted Forest Project.



A climber scaling a high cave wall to harvest bird’s nests in one of the caves in Bukit Sarang as a couple of bats escape from the bright light.

### **1. Bukit Sarang – where white bats and lingering mystery**

It was about three in the afternoon and the sky was suddenly getting darker when we were about to leave Kampung Keseng, a remote Punan village about two and a half hours drive by 4WD from Bintulu Town. Our destination was Bukit Sarang, another two hours and 45 minutes by boat from the village.

Our boatman 42-year-old Suring Jaweng assured us his top priority was our safety and getting us to our destination before sunset.

We set off from the makeshift jetty at Kampung Keseng amidst the grim prospects of a deluge.

We braced for impending storm and quickly wrapped up our cameras — and other personal belongings to ensure we at least had warm clothing for the cold night to come.

However, when the rain came, it was not as heavy as anticipated. We rejoiced at not having to endure the woeful consequences of getting all soaked up.

As we journeyed along the murky Kakus River, the weather improved and our boat cruised uneventfully upstream towards our destination.

About an hour later, the sky turned bright and as our boat headed towards the much smaller Sungei Maing, the murky water of Sungei Kakus slowly diminished.

The water of Sungei Maing was dark due to the peatland vegetation. But the river is still pristine and we came across many species of birds such as black hawks, colourful kingfishers and even some large owls. An hour later, we reached Sungei Sarang which had skrung due to the current dry weather.

Suring had to slow down due to the shallow steam and protruding deadwood and branches. It took almost 45 minutes of manoeuvring along the shallow and narrow Sungei Sarang before we finally reached the Bukit Sarang research station where we spent the night.

On our arrival, we met Su Lee Seng, 47, and his fellow workers who have been staying at their own quarters near the research station.

Su, fondly called Jimmy by his colleagues, has been working in the deep jungles of Bukit Sarang with eight others for a company, set up by the Bukit Sarang cave-owners from Kampung Keseng and a businessman, to manage the caves mainly for the lucrative bird's nests' industry.

Su has taken over the job as supervisor from his late younger brother who had mysteriously disappeared some time in February and his remains were found just last week about half an hour of boat ride downstream.

Jimmy said he and his family were now trying to come to terms with his brother's tragic death, saying the investigation was still on-going (optional).



A man helps a co-worker climb up a rope to harvest bird's nests in one of the Bukit Sarang caves.

### **Bukit Sarang Limestone hill**

Bukit Sarang is a small limestone hill, surrounded by peat swamps. It comprises two limestone hill complexes, the larger being Batu Anyi and the smaller Batu Lebik, both riddled with numerous caves of various sizes with underground water passages that support rich aquatic wildlife and other biodiversities that depend on the caves and the peat swamp ecosystem.

There are over 20 caves in Bukit Sarang whose systems create a suitable condition for bird's nests production. Here is where sustainable harvesting of bird's nests has been successfully carried out.

Some of the well-known Bukit Sarang caves are the Pakan Cave, Padong Cave, Bintawa Cave, Lebih Cave, Gua Rusa, Tanjung Cave and Mahkota Cave. Around Bukit Sarang area, there are several high hills but only two are of significant heights — namely Up 33 and Up 3. We had the chance to ascend Up 3, taking us about half an hour to reach the summit.

The panoramic view from the peak was breathtaking. We were in awe of the verdant canopy of the lush pristine rainforests. Visitors would definitely find scaling the hill well worth the effort.

In recent years, Joanes revealed, their research collaborators had discovered two new species of plants, one new species of lizards and frogs, and 26 endemic snail species which is the highest endemic snail concentration on the smallest surface of limestone bedrock in Borneo.

## **Caves**

Due to access restrictions, the only way into the Bukit Sarang cave systems is through a path leading to the limestone peak at UP 3.

Reaching the peak on foot may take around half an hour. Along the way, you can find different limestone-restricted plant species and cave-dwelling insects.

Early explorers found at least two sets of human skeletons at Tanjung Cave. Moreover, they also found fingerings and drawings of early cave dwellers there.

## **Birds**

Bird inventories have been done in Bukit Sarang with about 120 species being catalogued. Some interesting species are Blue-Winged Pitta, Hooded Pitta, four types of lowland Trogons and the elusive Bornean Ground Cuckoo. There are a host of other birds, including various species of hornbills, kingfishers, owls, eagles and hawks.

## **Frog and snakes**

Bukit Sarang and its surrounding ecosystem also harbour interesting flora and fauna, including insects, snails and frogs. Frog species here are literally common along walkways near cave entrances, especially during wet season.

## **Bats**

Mammals, usually related or depending on caves, are bats. There are now over 30 species found in Bukit Sarang. Bukit Sarang is where a living Lesser Tailless Roundleaf Bat (*Coelops robinsoni*) was discovered in Borneo. A rare species of white bats is also found at the Pakan Cave.

## **Plants**

Bukit Sarang is also rich in plants, including orchids and limestone-restricted species. According to a scientific paper on a research conducted in the area, two new species of *Begonia* were found there a couple of years ago.



A sample of bird's nests found in one of the caves at Bukit Sarang.

#### **Comments from a bird nests' farm owners and workers**

Those we interviewed all agreed the Bukit Sarang area should be preserved and conserved for their rich flora and fauna. For Bugang Sati, one of the cave owners, all efforts to turn Bukit Sarang into a National Park should be most welcomed.

“I believe if Bukit Sarang were gazetted as a National Park, the whole area could be excluded from all kinds of development, including oil palm plantations.

“At the same time, I believe once it's gazetted as a National Park, our people can earn side incomes from transporting visitors to the Park. On top of that, we can also provide homestays for those wishing to experience village life along the Kakus River,” Bugang added.

However, he cautioned the authorities not to include their native customary rights (NCR) land as part of the National Park as they wanted to utilise the land for agriculture purposes. “I must state here if the government wants to gazette Bukit Sarang area, I'm even ready to help explain the concept to our people.

“But I would like to suggest we gazette the Bukit Sarang area first, and then the government can slowly expand it once state land and NCR land are verified,” Bugang said on behalf of his wife, Tuai Rumah Ado Bilong.

Ado concurred that the gazettment of Bukit Sarang would be good for everyone, especially the cave owners and all her people. Kampung Keseng now has 121 families with a population about 800-strong.

As for the workers living in the jungles of Bukit Sarang, they also agreed the area deserved to be turned into a National Park.

For Mus Ikau, who has been working in Bukit Sarang for the past six years, the area should be gazetted into a National Park as it is rich in biodiversity.

“We still have many types of animals, bats, birds, insects, frogs, snakes and flowers which should be protected against any kind of agriculture activities. And most importantly, the caves have great potential for all kinds of research.

“Once this area is turned into a National Park, I’m sure many visitors would want to visit,” said Mus, an Iban from Balingian, Mulah.

Andersson Lim, a 21-year-old Chinese-Iban from Song, said Bukit Surang area offered a wide range of activities such as caving, hiking and boating.

“Visitors who love caving, will surely love it here with so many caves located within walking distance from the present research station which could also be turned into homestay.

“A few days’ stay here would be fantastic for them to discover more caves,” Lim enthused. As for Su (Lee Seng), who supports the idea of gazetting Bukit Sarang area into a National Park, he has come to love this place after visiting six months ago to look for his late brother.

“Now that he’s gone, I do hope this place could be preserved and conserved as a National Park. I believe the discovery of the skeletons at Pakan Cave would attract researchers to do more studies and unravel the mystery of this place. In the long run, this will enrich our knowledge of the history of the area,” Su added.



A group of colleagues giving the thumbs-up after reaching the summit of Batu Anyi.







**2. Binyo Penyilam**

The black water of Julan Lake at Binyo Penyilam ripples silently and mysteriously under the sun — like a black mirror. On days when it's a bit misty, the winds stop blowing and the leaves remain still, one can even spot some stilt-like wooden planks of equal length in the lake.

If you happened to go to the only longhouse at the bank where the Binyo meets its tributary, Penyilam, elderly resident of Joseph Longhouse Lapjit Angkim, 85, would tell you why sometimes you could see the stilt-like logs in the middle of Julan Lake although most times, there were no signs of them at all.

### **The folklore**

Lapjit said it all happened a long time ago when Julan Lake was still dry and standing on the land was a longhouse. Among the longhouse community was a family comprising a grandmother with two grandchildren — a boy and a girl — who liked to run around all day.

One day, the Python King and his wife happened by their village. Out of fear for the reptilian couple, the villagers ganged up, trying to take them down. They managed to kill the Python King but the Queen escaped.

That night, the villagers celebrated their victory. They cut the Python King into pieces and cooked it over an open fire with local herbs. It smelled so nice that everyone could hardly wait for it to be cooked.

In the boiling pot, the spirit of the Python King said: "It's okay, just eat me."

But no one paid any attention.

There was so much merry-making and feasting that the villagers soon got very tired. They fell soundly asleep.

The grandmother, however, did not join in the celebration. She did not take any python meat but sat quietly in her hut, looking worried and weary.

When the whole village slipped into a slumber, she remained awake. Quietly waiting.

At midnight, she suddenly woke up her grandchildren.

"Run now — as fast as you can away from the village. Don't return anymore for there will be nothing left. Go away and start a new life somewhere far," the grandmother implored.

Having no idea what was going on, the two children refused to go. But the urgency their grandmother's voice made them feel something horrible was about to happen. Reluctantly, they got up and ran out as fast as they could.

When they finally reached the riverbank, they looked back and saw their longhouse being turned upside down and a pool of black water emerging from the ground to engulf it. At times, all that they could see were some stilts, pointing towards the starry sky.

The boy and the girl clambered on their boat and peddled out of the small Penyilam River as fast as they could. They stopped only after they were safely away. At the junction where the two rivers — Binyo and Penyilam – meet, they started a new life, never again to return to their longhouse.

“To this very day, the stilts of the longhouse — they still appear in the Lake. Sometimes you see them. Most times, you don’t,” Lapjit related.

### **The people**

Binyo Penyilam area is situated at the south east of Bintulu town. Through GP Pusaka, we took a speedboat from Bintulu town and plied along the Kemena River.

Along the way, we passed by scenic Sebauh town and the legendary floating temple of Natok Kon Temple. From Kemena River, we turned into Binyo River.

Rivers are never stagnant but River Binyo seems different. So still was the water that we felt we were traveling on a lake. And even stranger is that even though its water appears black in colour, the river is, somehow, able to reflect the minutest details such as the different shades of green from the vegetation along the banks.

After two and a half hours, we reached Joseph Longhouse. We considered it an auspicious day for us as we got to meet the longhouse chief, Joseph Lapjit, 44, and four generations of his family — grandpa Lapjit, Joseph himself, his sons, Li Joseph, 26, and Christopher Alam Joseph, 17, as well as Joseph’s one-year-old grandson whom we did not get the name.

Grandpa Lapjit was not the only one with ancient folklore to tell. Joseph, being a farmer, fisherman and hunter, also had his tales to share.

“Once at Julian Lake, I saw six colourful ducks. When I wanted to take a better look, they disappeared. I only managed to catch a glimpse of them — like now you see them, now you don’t — that kind of situation. And it happened only once. That was it,” Joseph recalled.

On many occasions when he was fishing alone in the river or hunting alone in the jungle, he heard Iban music coming from nowhere.

“That’s strange because within the vicinity of our longhouse, there are no other longhouses,” Joseph said.

He has been the longhouse chief for a decade. Long time ago, his grandfather Angkim wanted to make Binyo Penyilam a national park.

“We want the area to be made a national park because we want it to be sustainable. Outsiders have been coming here to poison the fish. If turning the area into a national park means these people can be kept out, we are all for it. But if after that, we are not allowed to fish or hunt here, then we are against it. Fishing is our livelihood. There’s nothing else for us here if we are not allowed to fish and hunt,” Joseph pointed out. His son Christopher shared the same sentiment.

Christopher had tried working in Bintulu for about a year but had since decided to stay back in the longhouse. To him, it’s not worthwhile working in Bintulu because at the end of the day, all his salary would go into paying rent.

“Our surrounding forests and rivers are like our market. We can just go there and get what we need for the day. We can go fishing or looking for wild vegetables and jungle products. This area still has a lot of fish such as Tapah and Arowana. Once I went fishing and caught two to three kg of fish,”

For city folk, the Arowana is a pet fish but to Christopher, “the Arowana tastes really good.”

Born and raised in the area, Christopher knows the jungles and the rivers like the back of his hand. He roams the jungles and plays in the rivers. There is no fear of losing his way, and unlike Joseph, he has yet to experience any paranormal encounters — so far.

“I go into the jungles all the time, just to walk around. Not really doing much,” he said.

He would also like to see the Binyo Penyilam area turned into a national park open to researchers, visitors and tourists. As the longhouse is nearest to Lake Julian, he will be able to make a living as tour guide or boatman.

“Our forests are still rich in everything. For trees, there are still ramin and bellman and for fish, there are many types, especially Arowana and Tapah. Then, there are orchids as well.”











**The researchers**

Due to its unique peat swamps, over the years, Binyo Penyilam has attracted both local and overseas researchers.

According to Joanes, the unique landscape of Binyo Penyilam consists of mainly peat swamp forests but other forest types also are present at the edge of the flooded peat swamp forests such as lowland dipterocarp forests and kerangas forests that cater for numerous unique species of flora and fauna.

“The main vegetation surrounding the Binyo-Penyilam is a mosaic of partially disturbed and original swamp forest that has developed over a deep inland basin. The permanently flood area includes peat dome forest of alan (*Shorea Albida*) and ramin (*Gonystylus Bancanus* and *G.Maingayi*),” Joanes explained.

Due to its distinctive topography, scientifically significant species endemic to Borneo found in Binyo-Penyilam area are orchid species such as *Dyakia Hendersoniana*, a monospecific genus recorded recently along the riverbanks of Sungai Binyo and *Dendrobium kenepaiense* that was previously only known to occur in Kalimantan.

“Orchids are abundant in Binyo Penyilam — from some common species in Sarawak to some Bornean endemic species. This place is great for orchid lovers. Some rare species such as *Dendrobium Kenepaiense*, *Dimorphorchis Lowii* and *Dyakia Hendersoniana* can be found and lots of *Trichoglottis Smithii*, a peat swamp orchid species, can also be seen blooming by the riverbanks during the flowering season,” Joanes said.

The peat swamps and Kerangas forests in Binyo Penyilam are good habitats for the pitcher plants or the *Nepenthes* species.

Six species of *Nepenthes* can be found in Binyo Penyilam. Most can be commonly found within the Padang vegetation in the core of Binyo Penyilam’s peat swamp area.

In terms of fauna, Joanes said the area was well-known for its fish and birds.

“Binyo Penyilam is one of the important spawning grounds for fresh water fish in Bintulu. It is mainly famous for Tapah fish or scientifically known as *Wallago leerii*, a cat fish species that can grow to a massive 50 kg.

“This fish is one of the major economic resources for the locals. Since fresh water fish are abundant in Binyo Penyilam, it’s a good place for sustainable fishing activities. One protected species, the Arowana, is also found in the Penyilam River within the proposed national park.”

For birds, he said, Binyo had more than 30 recorded bird types. Long-tailed parakeets can be commonly seen in Binyo Penyilam. Kingfishers and broadbills can also be seen along the main Binyo River.

Then there are 63 species of dragonflies and damselflies, out of which 11 are endemic to Borneo.

In total, he said, there were 35 animal species of which two are endangered; 31 fish species, including Arowanas; 92 plant species, all of which are protected; dragonflies and damselflies and 25 bird species.

“I definitely believe the place has the potential to be developed into a national park. And it will one which will attract many visitors, both local and international.

“Among some of the activities I can think of in this national park are birding, fishing, jungle tracking, look for pitcher plants, dragonflies and damselflies, photography and camping,” he said.

Effort to conserve the Binyo Pinyiram area by turning them into National Park started as early as 2005 where GP Pusaka requested the forest director to discontinue approving logging licences for Binyo Penyilam area.

“In 2008, to strengthen the conservation of habitats and unique species, GP Pusaka excluded about 2,000 ha of plantable areas for the extension of Binyo Penyilam water catchment area to prevent forest loss, siltation and flash floods,” Joanes disclosed.

He added that the area could have been replanted and developed but GP Pusaka’s conscious efforts to conserve and preserve the area were due to its unique landscape and vegetation.

“We want to protect the unique landscape. This is an inland swampy wetland where flood water can reach up to five to 10 metres high, especially in the core of Binyo Penyilam.

“And because of its uniqueness, it has several new species and endangered species of flora and fauna. I believe the area is more suitable for river eco-tourism and the conservation of the various endemic species as well as their habitats.”

Apart from protecting endangered ecosystems as legally required for planted forests and to fulfil other state legislations, Joanes said the proposed gazettment of the area into a national park was to internationally highlight the conservation of planted forests in Sarawak.

“We are hoping for international recognition of Sarawak in landscape and biodiversity conservation within the planted forest project. Most importantly, we want to prevent any illegal activities within the area through a legal framework.”

He said if the area were to be opened up for oil palm plantation, such large-scale land development would greatly impact the area, causing siltation, water pollution and destruction of Tapah breeding grounds and the forests which are home to different species, as constant flash floods will be inevitable.

With rampant outside encroachment, he foresaw unsustainable harvesting of fish and wildlife due to electro fishing, fish poisoning and uncontrolled hunting which will result in the decline or loss of wildlife species.

The government From the government's perspective, Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC) deputy general manager (Protected Areas and Biodiversity Conservation Division) Oswald Braken Tisen said both Bukit Sarang and Binyo Penyilam were in the initial stages of gazettelement.

"This means it's in the process being finalised as national parks. It means the government has gazetted the intention to set up a national park.

"Now those with claims of the area, may submit them or those who object, may submit their objections to the government.

"After that, there will be determination of claims to be followed by the decision to proceed with gazettelement of an amended size or drop the gazettelement completely," Braken explained.

He added that Bukit Sarang National Park was intended to be gazetted for the protection of the karst (limestone) system, its swiftlets as well as the crocodile species.

"The place has been known to produce bird's nests harvested by the locals. However, it needs to be gazetted to ensure sustainability of bird's nests harvest."

As for Binyo Penyilam, the unique inland lake system has made it worthwhile for gazettelement to allow for conservation.

On the reactions of affected locals, Braken said there might be some objections but these would subside following clear explanation from the authorities.

"This quite understandable. They would object to until they realise that gazettelement does not mean taking away their land but rather, enhancing the sustainability of the forests and its products."

## **Conclusion**

The protection of both Bukit Sarang and Binyo Pinyiram areas are critical as they could further contribute to the conservation of species, especially in the inland peat swamp landscapes.

Joanes summed up: "Through our research collaboration works, we have recognised these areas as our conservation areas for the protection of endangered and endemic species. It also increases the importance of legal protection in these two areas to enable effective conservation management and proper protection in the long run."

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