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BRUNEI

Samarinda, East Kalimantan
Indonesia
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Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter and Friends,

Brunei Darussalam is the Bornean country that has had no need to chop down its rainforests. With a population of only about 230,000 people and no distant central government to siphon away profits from its lucrative oil fields, Brunei has not had to mine its forests for foreign exchange.

About 56 percent of the sultanate's total land area is still covered with undisturbed primary rainforest, and 80 percent of Brunei's land supports forest of some sort. The government aims to keep it that way. At the same time, long-term plans to diversify the national economy away from virtual total dependence on oil and gas include developing the domestic timber industry to meet local demand.

Brunei's demand for building materials is voracious. Over the past decade, the population has grown by about 30 percent, making half the population under 20 years old. By the year 2005, planners expect Brunei to be home to over 360,000 people. They will need a great deal of new housing, especially as young people tend to opt against living with extended families.

Forest planners in Brunei have estimated that at present rates of logging, taking all the timber that will be needed in Brunei from the nation's natural forests alone will begin to cause ecological stress about 30 years from now, in the 2020s. The Forestry Department, under the new Ministry of Industry and Primary Resources, is drawing up plans to increase wood production but avoid cutting too much natural forest.

The key to the expansion of Brunei's timber industry will be extensive timber plantations. New plantations are being started now with the hope of producing 100,000 cubic meters of wood 25 years from now. The Forestry Department is also gearing up its regulatory side. Changes in logging practices are expected to waste less wood. Processing industries will begin

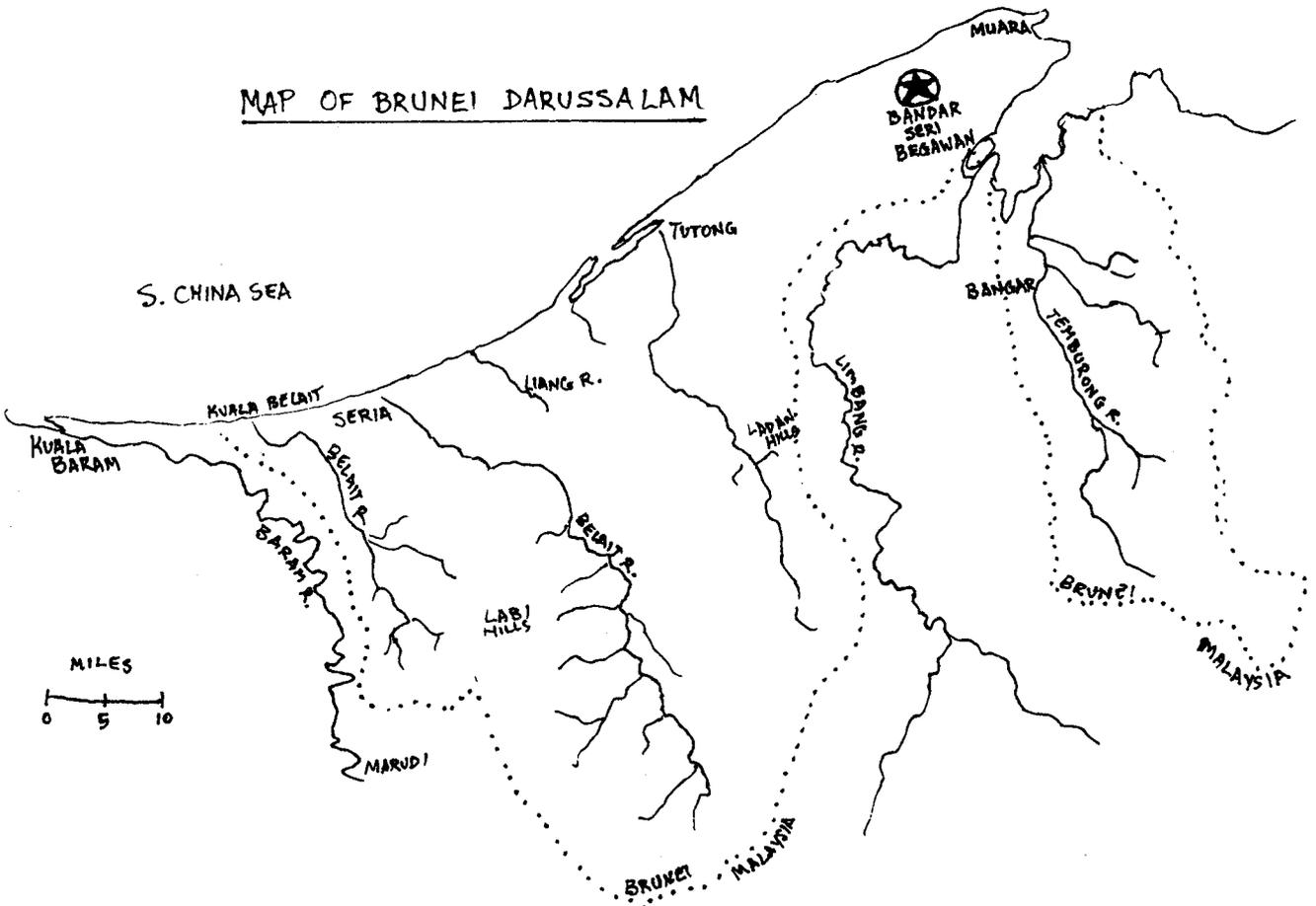
Judith Mayer is an Institute Fellow studying environmental protection, conservation, and sustainable development issues in Southeast Asia

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.



MAP OF BORNEO

MAP OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM



to use tree species currently overlooked in commercial production in Brunei (lesser known species). Many of these trees would be damaged in logging anyway, but then wastefully discarded. These strategies will allow Brunei to produce more sawn timber while damaging less natural forest land.

Ironically, while much of the motivation to diversify Brunei's economy is to provide enough jobs for the next generation of Bruneians, it is likely that much of the labor-intensive plantation work, in particular, will be done by foreigners rather than Bruneians, from the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. At present, about one-third of the jobs in Brunei are filled by foreigners, concentrated at high and low ends of the skills spectrum. Brunei is now in the midst of an ambitious program to upgrade national educational standards so that Bruneians -- especially ethnic Malay Bruneians -- will be adequately prepared to take over more highly skilled jobs in the future. But that also means that they may shy away from the heavy manual labor of forest work, if there are other opportunities.

The Forestry Department commissioned a national forest resources inventory and strategic planning study 5 years ago. Strategic priorities for developing the forestry sector in the long-run include timber production adequate to meet local demands; building up timber industries and processing for domestic consumption; safeguarding forest resources for environmental conservation; and developing non-timber forest resources like bamboo and rattan.

The Forestry Department is now planning a detailed vegetation inventory. Several forest and ecological research stations have been developed including both representative natural forests and extensive trial and nursery plots. The University of Brunei Darussalam Biology Department is also planning a wildlife ecology permanent research station in Temburong, a pristine forest area in the eastern portion of Brunei. And the government is considering establishing national parks in at least 3 locations, with several small recreational forests in more accessible locations.

The Forestry Department and government information services have launched a vigorous drive to increase Bruneian's awareness and regard for their nation's vast forest resource. Although Brunei produces few of its own feature TV broadcasts, forest-oriented programs have begun to show up regularly. Local newspaper, The Borneo Bulletin, also regularly runs forest-oriented articles, though they are as likely to be about Sarawak or Sabah as about Brunei.

Most Bruneians actually have little reason to be much aware of the jungle. About 80 percent of the population lives in a narrow band of suburban sprawl within a few miles of the coast, or in water villages built on stilts over the tidal portions and estuaries of the major rivers. It is a classic Malay pattern -- Malays along the coast, and indigenous people, in this case, about 30,000 Dayak Bruneians, in the interior.

I had intended to spend more of my time in Brunei in the interior. But in just over a week in the country, I didn't get much further than the urban fringes. And it struck me that most Bruneians stick to these areas as well, the hinterland completely beyond their daily consciousness.

With one of the highest GNPs per person in the world (estimated at US\$ 15,400 per head), it is as if Brunei inhabits a totally different economic world than its Bornean neighbors. Much of this wealth goes directly into the pockets of the sultan, of course. Before actually getting to Brunei, I did not quite believe what I had heard about the ubiquitous influence of the flamboyant ruler, Kebawah Duli Yang Maha Mulia Paduka Seri Baginda Sultan Haji Hassanah Bolkuah Mu'izzadin Waddaulah... Sultan dan Yang Di-Pertuan Negara Brunei Darussalam. (Yes, Every Bruneian school kid gets to memorize the titles, and those of his two wives as well.)

In addition to being astoundingly wealthy, he is also astoundingly popular. No amount of money spent on personal extravagance changes the fact that the oil money has provided Brunei with a welfare state. Health care is free to citizens; cheap for other residents. School is free with generous higher education stipends for those who pass muster. There are no major taxes, though fees for some government services. And plenty of jobs.

Almost half of the work force is employed by the state; a good portion of the remainder works for Brunei Shell or spin-off companies. Civil servants get subsidies or discount loans for just about anything they might spend money on: housing, cars, food, and trips to Mecca. But the easy life may backfire, as oil reserves begin to dwindle. Stimulating the entrepreneurial spirit among Brunei's Malay population is the government's biggest challenge.

So how do forestry and timber development fit in? The forestry sector may be the easiest front on which to push economic diversification. The demand is growing; the timber supplies are there, and the technology is not impossible to master. No nation in Southeast Asia has a better chance to practice truly regenerative, conservative forestry. I am hoping to see the jungles of Brunei in 25 years.

Sincerely,



Received in Hanover 5/23/89