

**The Proposed Endau-Rompin National Park :
The Mass Media And The Evolution Of A Controversy**

By

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THE PROPOSED ENDAU-ROMPIN NATIONAL PARK THE MASS MEDIA AND THE EVOLUTION OF A CONTROVERSY

1.0 Introduction

The proposed Endau-Rompin National Park and the controversy surrounding it is now regarded as a landmark in the conservation efforts in Malaysia. The controversy began in 1977 when a state government gave out logging licenses for part of a proposed national park. There was intense public opposition to the logging. The opposition to the logging took on the form of a national campaign with almost daily coverage in the mass media for over 6 months until logging was stopped. There was a lull in public attention and interest in the proposed national park between 1978 to the middle of 1985. During this time, behind-the-scenes efforts to have Endau-Rompin gazetted as a national park were not successful. In 1985, the Malayan Nature Society, in an effort to revive public interest on the issue of the proposed park, organised an expedition to scientifically document the richness of the flora and fauna of the Endau-Rompin area. This was carried out in conjunction with a national newspaper to ensure maximum publicity. The expedition lasted a year. The expedition generated a great deal of interest and enthusiasm with almost daily coverage of the findings of the expedition in the newspapers.

special documentaries on television. The success of the expedition also increased the appreciation of the public on the value of Endau-Rompin as a national park as well as put some pressure on the state governments to consent to the gazettment of the park. The findings of the expedition were summarised in a national conference in 1987 and also a pictorial book published in 1988.

Though the final chapter of the saga of the proposed Endau-Rompin National Park is yet to be written, as the Endau-Rompin area is yet to gazetted as a national park, or conservation, area the public controversy has shaped public awareness of the environmental costs of certain developmental policies, and the expedition has vividly demonstrated the value of environmental conservation.

2.0 The Development of Endau-Rompin Controversy

The Endau-Rompin controversy should perhaps be seen in the context of the economic developmental policy of Malaysia since the 1960's and the environmental costs that it incurred. One of the strategies of rapid economic growth was the exploitation of the rich natural resources in the country, especially its forest and land resources. The exploitation of such resources led to large scale land use

changes as primary forest areas were very rapidly logged. Forest areas found suitable for agriculture were converted to extensive rubber and oil palm plantations. In 1970, it was estimated that about 70% of the land area in Malaysia was still covered by forest. However, with the rapid rate of logging and the conversion of forest areas into rubber and oil palm plantations in the 1960's and 1970's, there was an estimated loss of about 1% of forest area per year, mostly of lowland forest.

The forest was seen mainly as a source of income that could be derived from its timber, and the rate of logging of the forests was dictated by the world demand for tropical hardwoods rather than by any long term plans. By the 1970's, Malaysia became one of the major exporters of tropical hardwoods in the world. Malaysia also became the world's leading exporter of rubber and palm oil.

In the course of such forestry and agricultural activities, even some of the areas designated as conservation areas, such as game reserves and wildlife sanctuaries, were encroached upon. Hence, there was a general concern among those who were aware of the rapidly changing land use situation that there is an urgent need to have a system of conservation areas where representative areas of all ecosystems in Malaysia would be legally protected before

they are permanently lost. However, such concerns were confined to a small segment of the population, mainly to some members of the civil service, institutions of higher learning, research institutions and some scientific and some non-governmental organisations (NGO). There was little public debate or sustained media attention on such issues. As such, it was an environmental problem, not a public or political issue.

In 1974, as a result of the concern on the loss of ecosystems, the Malayan Nature Society, an NGO, compiled and published in its journal a "Blueprint for Conservation". The Blueprint listed 64 areas in Peninsular Malaysia that it advocated should be legally protected as conservation areas. Some of the areas listed were existing conservation areas while others were newly proposed as conservation areas. Shortly after, in 1975, the Malaysian government included in its "Third Malaysia Plan", the development masterplan for the country for the period from 1976 to 1980, a chapter on the environment, which outlined the country's environmental policies for the first time. This is a reflection of the realization within the government that environmental problems brought about by economic development activities should be addressed, so as not to negate the benefits of economic development. The section on conservation within the chapter on the environment included a list of 23 conservation areas which were already legally protected and

24 other areas proposed for conservation. Included in the proposed areas is the Endau-Rompin National Park. This was to be the second major national park in Peninsular Malaysia with an area of about 500,000 acres. This would complement the existing single national park in the northern part of the peninsula.

The proposed Endau-Rompin National Park straddles across the states of Pahang and Johor in the southern part of the peninsula. The boundaries of the park were defined by topography and remaining forest cover rather than by political boundaries. It includes parts of three forest reserves, i.e. the Labis, Endau-Mas and Lesong Forest Reserves, as well as the Endau-Kluang Wildlife Reserve. The proposed national park is known to be rich in wildlife, which includes a breeding population of the endangered Sumatran Rhinoceros, the large number of this animal known to exist in the peninsula. The proposed Endau-Rompin National Park also includes a diversity of land forms and habitats. Its rich flora and fauna would help to preserve much of the representative species and habitats in the southern part of Peninsular Malaysia.

The problems of the proposed Endau-Rompin National Park started in 1976, when the state government of Pahang decided to issue logging licences that included part of the 90,000

acres of the core area of the park that lies within that state. The state government also indicated that it intended to give out licenses that would cover up to 30,000 acres of the proposed park. Logging activities started towards the end of 1976 and attempts by various organisations to get the state to revoke the licences were of no avail.

In May 1977 the Malayan Nature Society in conjunction with four other scientific and conservation organisations in Malaysia, took the unprecedented step (at least in Malaysia) of buying a full page of advertisement in a national newspaper stating their case of why the proposed Endau-Rompin National Park should not be logged. The advertisement gave the background of the proposal for the park, the ecological role it would play as a water catchment area, the scientific interest of the area and its value as a conservation area. The impact of the advertisement was dramatic, as this was the first time that non-governmental organisations was publicly challenging the policy of a state government in a paid advertisement. Expression of support against the logging was almost immediate and came from various organisations and individuals. There were many letters to newspapers deploring the logging of a proposed national park.

The state government did not reply nor make any public comment for five days, and there was some concern by the

environmental groups that interest in the issue would decline and finally fizzle out if the state chose to ignore the protests. However on May 12th the state government, through a senior official issued a statement that the ".....90,000 acres contained some valuable timber. The Pahang State government would not object to the setting up of a National Park, but this would only be done after the state has exploited its economic potential. When it comes to choosing between human welfare and animal survival, the state had to opt for the former." This statement served to fuel the issue as it totally misrepresented the issue and tried to cover up an untenable decision. To many observers, it did not make any sense to log the forest before making it into a national park, where the primary objective was to preserve the park in as pristine a condition as possible. The argument by the state clearly showed that it had no understanding of what a national park is. However, it was the last statement that drew the most critical comments in the press. Few people were convinced that the issue was between human welfare and animal survival, as most people see the logging of the proposed part as the greed of a few powerful people in the plunder of the forest resources. The loss of a natural heritage and an amenity for the public was seen as serving to enrich a few of people who were already rich.

The statement by the state government gave impetus to a campaign to stop the logging. Various organisations started a signature campaign and organised the sending of letters and post-cards to the chief minister of the state. Other forms of protest were adopted, such as the distribution of posters, T-shirts, car and motorcycle stickers, and the holding of public forums. There was a concerted effort to get a broad spectrum of Malaysian society to give their support and this was largely successful. Besides the usual support from professional societies and universities, the trade unions as well as the business communities, through the chambers of commerce, issued statements calling upon the state government to stop the logging.

Some of the members of the Malayan Nature Society went with members of the press to the logging sites to find out first hand the extent and impact of the logging activities. This resulted in a number of front page news in a number of newspapers on the extent of destruction to the forest brought about by the logging. This demonstrated the folly of thinking that a national park could still be made after an area is completely logged. After the publicity, logging activities were stepped up as some of the logging companies fear that with such adverse publicity, logging may be halted. Editorial comments (in the various newspapers.) against the logging appeared. Politicians asked questions in Parliament and demanded that logging be stopped.

Because Malaysia has a federal system of government, the states have a certain amount of autonomy over land matters and the Federal Parliament had no jurisdiction over state governments. It was becoming an acute embarrassment to the Federal government that the state government has chosen to ignore its advice and the Third Malaysia plan by logging the proposed park. There were calls by politicians for sanctions against the state government since state governments still depend on the Federal government for funds. Various Federal ministers, including the Prime Minister, came out against the logging but they also stated that under the constitution, they cannot intervene directly. However on September 30, 1977, four months into the controversy, the Federal government announced that it had refused export quota applications for logs coming out of Endau-Rompin. Hence while the trees could be cut, the logs could not be exported.

A week later, on October 5th, there was a full page advertisement in a national newspaper entitled "A Case for Survival" which stated the case for logging, apparently on behalf of the State government. However, the advertisement carried the signature of one of the persons representing the logging companies. The basic argument was that the State needed the revenue generated from the logging for other development projects and that one must be "pragmatic" when

it comes to conservation. The advertisement did not appear to convince many people, and public pressure against the state government continued. Finally, on October 25, the Pahang state government announced that it would not issue any new logging licences but that logging of some of old areas would continue, as "...it would be wasteful if valuable timber in the area were left to rot." That was the final public note of defiance from the state government. In the Parliamentary debates in December, opinion was expressed that incidents, such as Endau-Rompin, should not be allowed to occur again. By the end of the year, the controversy over the logging ended, but problem of gazetting the area into a national park remained.

3.0 The Interlude

There was little media coverage of the Endau-Rompin issue after the end of 1977. There was an expectation that after the controversy, the Endau-Rompin would eventually be gazetted. In 1980, the National Parks Act was passed by Parliament to enable suitable areas to be made national parks. The states of Pahang and Johore still declined to consent to the gazetting of Endau-Rompin as a national park. The reasons given was that land matters were still a state prerogative under the constitution and that under the National Parks Act, the jurisdiction of the land would pass

to Federal control. The Federal government subsequently amended the National Park Act in 1984 to give the states a greater say in the management of national parks but the states still refused to act, stating that they were considering the setting up of state parks, rather than national parks.

4.0 The Endau-Rompin Scientific and Heritage Expedition

It was becoming clear to most observers that an impasse has been reached and both the states on whose land the park was located would not take any step to conserve the area as a national park. The Malayan Nature Society decided that the best way to rekindle public interest and support which would hopefully nudge the states into acting was to stress the positive aspects of the proposed park. It decided to organise what it called the "Malaysian Heritage and Scientific Expedition to Endau-Rompin" in 1985. This expedition was to be a Malaysian effort, with the support of the Malaysian scientific community, and with funds and volunteer help from the public. It was also envisaged that besides documenting the geology, flora and fauna of the proposed park, the expedition would serve as an educational experience for the groups of volunteers and school children who would be encouraged to visit the expedition. To ensure

maximum publicity, a national newspaper would be invited to be the major sponsor. The first Prime Minister of the country agreed to be the patron of the expedition and his interest and enthusiasm contributed much to the interest and support of the public at the early stages.

The expedition started officially in June 1985 and because of the uncertainty in funds and problems of logistic support, was planned for 6 months. The initial stories that filtered out of the base camp in the jungle into the newspapers soon captured the imagination of the Malaysian public. This was greatly helped by the fact that the proposed park was little studied and also had a great diversity of habitats and scenic areas. Some new species of plants and animals were discovered. Though initially only two of the national newspapers paid much attention to the ongoings of the expedition, it soon became clear that the reading public looked forward to news about the expedition and all newspapers subsequently reported extensively about the expedition. Members of the public wanted to participate and volunteered to help the scientists in their work, such as collecting and labelling specimens, recording readings of instruments as well as helping to make trails and construct subcamps. Contribution in cash and kind were sent to the newspapers to be channelled to the expedition. Eventually, about M\$250,000 (about US\$100,000) was raised from the public. What was more important, besides the amount, was

the high numbers of small donors, indicating the extent of public support and the willingness to identify with the endeavour. Many of the business firms also contributed goods and services that greatly facilitated the running of the expedition, such as mobile phones and vehicles. Because of the scientific interest of the proposed area and the public support, the expedition was extended for another 6 months to cover a full calendar year. Over 70 scientists conducted their studies at various times during the expedition and over 500 volunteers and guests visited the base camp and involved themselves in various aspects of the expedition. Because of the interest of the public, a half-hour TV documentary was made and shown over the national television network besides shorter news items.

After the expedition ended, the Malayan Nature Society held a national symposium to report on the scientific findings of the expedition which was compiled as a special volume of the Malayan Nature Journal. It was also decided that it was important to produce a pictorial book on the expedition of the proposed park to demonstrate vividly the richness and value of the flora and fauna of the park. The book was published last year and it received much critical praise on the quality of the photographs. The book illustrated to the public, and many of the policy makers, the outstanding features of the tropical rain forest and why it should be conserved.

5.0 The Way Ahead

The Endau-Rompin expedition, the publication of the proceedings of the symposium and the pictorial book had a two-fold impact on the policymakers have been twofold. Firstly, it demonstrated the scientific as well as the scenic value of the proposed Endau-Rompin national park. The policy makers began seeing Endau-Rompin as a potentially valuable natural resource which, besides its intrinsic conservation value, would provide recreational opportunities to local residents as well as tourists. The second impact is that the demonstration of public enthusiasm and support has been noted by politicians and that some political mileage could be obtained by associating with a popular cause. The corollary to this is that one should not be associated with an unpopular cause such as the further logging of the proposed park.

Hence, the politicians and decision makers became more receptive to approaches made by the Malayan Nature Society to discuss the establishment of a national park. The MNS held briefings for the politicians and government officials of both states. It also submitted a proposed management plan for the park. After the state governments indicated that they intended make the Endau-Rompin area into two separate State Parks, so as to enable the management to remain under state control, the MNS advised on the necessary

legislation that would ensure that nature conservation would be the main objective of the proposed parks. It is expected that the Johore State would be the first to gazette the park into a conservation area, probably sometime this year. The Pahang state government has invited the MNS to conduct a scientific expedition to the Pahang side of the proposed Endau-Rompin National Park, after which, they had indicated that they would gazette the area into a conservation area as well.

In conclusion, there are perhaps a number of lessons that we can draw from the long-drawn controversy. It is almost 12 years since the controversy first erupted in 1977.

The first lesson is that environmental controversies can drag on for years. Whatever opinion finally prevails may depend on who has the energy and persistence to sustain public interest in the controversy.

The second is the importance of public support. When it has been demonstrated that the issue has broad public appeal, politicians, at least the more perceptive ones with longer range ambitions, would acknowledge such support and would wish to be associated with a popular cause. Hence, the seeking of public

support who would provide both moral, physical and financial support is of great importance.

Thirdly, the mass media have played a crucial role in the presenting the case of Endau-Rompin to the public. The support of the editors and reporters in the controversy had meant that one's views were presented fully. Public opinion was overwhelmingly in favour of proposed national park during the controversy and the press had played a critical role in molding public opinion. During the expedition, the continual media exposure created an awareness of the importance of Endau-Rompin and ensured public support.

Fourthly, we became very conscious of the importance of visual images. The photograph in the newspapers, the images on the TV and the photographs in books transformed Endau-Rompin from abstraction to reality for most people. The pictures of devastation from the logging and the pictures from the expedition brought Endau-Rompin vividly to the mind.

Fifthly, that international opinion has a role to play, and although it is not a substitute for national public opinion, it can complement it effectively. There had been letters of support from overseas to the

various government agencies. These were difficult to ignore, as the impact of bad international publicity may have practical consequences. This is especially the case when the government is seriously promoting international tourism and would not like to see their expensive advertising campaigns negated by a bad press overseas on the destruction of the environment.

Sixth, that the government is not a monolith and that there is a diversity of opinion even within the government and decision makers. All kinds of people with different political outlooks and sympathies work within the government. When public issue is drawn out, it would be debated within the government and this could change the opinion of decision makers. Besides, decision makers change over time with transfers and retirement, and new people replacing them may hold different opinion. Also, public criticism of policies and decisions, if based on facts, are not always unwelcome. In government departments, there is often a jockeying of influence, power and budget between departments. Criticisms against a department can sometimes be used to justify requests for more staff and an increased budget the next year.

Seventh, we have also found that it had been helpful to get the support of prominent and well respected public figures on the issue. For example, we had the active support of a former prime minister and several ministers and former ministers. It confers a certain amount of respectability to the cause, so that we cannot be so easily dismissed as being part of the extremist environmentalist fringe. Statements of support from well respected public figures also make news and hence help to keep the issue in the public eye for a longer period. Another benefit of such support is that fund raising, especially from the private sector, becomes easier.

Finally, we found that environmental quality and protection has a common sense appeal to everyone, from almost all segments of society. If only from a selfish point of view, environmental quality concerns everyone. Air pollution, water pollution and floods will affect everyone, though perhaps not to the same extent. A loss of a species, or of a conservation area would ultimately mean a loss of the natural heritage of everyone.