

The Impact Of Indigenous Cultural And Traditional Practices On Nature Conservation Perspectives: A Study Of The Batek Negrito In Malaysia

Teh Kate Yng¹

¹*Faculty of Communication and Creative Industries Tunku Abdul Rahman University College, Penang Branch
Campus
tehky@taruc.edu.my*

Abstract: This study seeks to explore the cultures and traditions of one of the earliest ethnic groups, Batek Negrito, who inhabits the rainforest in Peninsular Malaysia, which are correspondingly related to their concerns on the values of forest resources and the importance of environmental protection. Taking the case on Taman Negara Pahang in Kuala Tahan, in-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face and non-participant observations were employed to supplement the qualitative data from the interviews. The findings reveal that the forest protection is the prime concern for Batek who sustain themselves by hunting and gathering forest produces. Their knowledge and awareness of sustainability which have been developed over thousands of years, the aboriginal rituals and animistic beliefs about the sacred forest were also found as contributors to supportive attitudes towards nature conservation. However, this study has found two conflicting perspectives on nature conservation among the respondents: forest protection and unsustainable harvesting of forest resources. Claiming themselves as the original inhabitants of the forest lands, the Batek argued they should be granted the rights over the resources in their territories. Hence, understanding the indigenous cultural and traditional practices can contribute to even greater understanding of their perspectives on nature conservation which could help to preserve the cultural rights of the aborigines, their 'supermarket' and the national park, at the same time.

Keywords: Batek, indigenous, national park, nature conservation, perspectives, sustainability

Introduction

The environmental degradation problems have been an enormous challenge for many countries as the mishaps have endangered the people's quality of life (Hadi, 2009; Xu, 2012; Mokhsim & Salleh, 2014; Ogboru & Anga, 2015). In the context of addressing the environmental issues and concerns, national concerted initiatives on nature conservation have been taken by the governments to protect natural resources for improving societal wellbeing and quality of life. A perspective study is very important in any nature conservation activities because it shows the kind of interaction and communication that people have to experience within the conservation area which subsequently determines their support for conservation efforts (Ormsby & Kaplin, 2005; Muhumuza & Balkwill, 2013). It could also provide important insights into observations, understandings and interpretations of the social impact and ecological outcomes of environmental conservation (Bennett, 2016).

Various kind of research initiatives have been undertaken in Asian countries to enhance understanding of the perceptions of rural stakeholders on forest protection and their attitudes whether to support or not the conservation activities, particularly in and around the national parks. Many results indicated that the majority of them held favourable attitudes towards these national parks mainly due to the socio-economic benefits generated from the tourism development (Walpole & Goodwin, 2001; Chen et al., 2005; Razzaq et al., 2011; Jaafar et al., 2013). In different words, these researchers have suggested that direct and indirect benefits which local people could exert from the conservation areas would promote incentives for people to perceive nature conservation positively, and therefore allowing forest to regenerate. Previous studies have documented other factors that influence local perceptions include human-wildlife conflicts, awareness of park's existence and goals, relationship between park management and local communities, and socio-demographic variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, level of education and household structure.

In relevant to this, past literatures have also debated the importance roles of religion, cultural values, traditions and beliefs in moulding local views and attitudes towards environmental issues. For example, Park (2005) affirms that, a person's personality or attitude has been sometimes described as the

individual and subjective aspect of culture. According to Anderson and Gale (1992), culture is seen as “a dynamic mix of symbols, beliefs, languages and practices that people create, but not a fixed thing or entity governing humans” (p.3). The concept of cultural traditions in anthropology has historically denoted a broad body of beliefs, customary behaviours and modes of social organisation that are transmitted over generations (Head et al., 2005).

Although substantial studies have been conducted to focus on locals’ conservation perspectives and the contributing factors, little work has specifically implemented to examine the environmental attitudes of indigenous people who are practising animism. Therefore, the primary objectives of this paper aim to explore the cultural and traditional practices of the Batek Negrito who are living next to the Taman Negara Pahang in Kuala Tahan and the impact on their support for environmental protection. Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia are divided into 19 sub-groups and categorised under three main groups according to their different physical appearances, languages and customs: Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay, also called “Melayu Asli” (Zainal Abidin & Wee, 2013). Research on conservation perspectives of the Batek Negrito ethnic group in Malaysia is still new. Thus, this study provides a significant contribution for the government and non-government conservation agencies by generating useful information on indigenous cultural and traditional practices and understanding to the extent of the Batek community involvement in environmental management of the national park.

Methods

In-depth interviews and non-participant observations were employed to collect qualitative data in this study. Qualitative method was applied as it recognises the value and validity of personal experience and the existence of competing ways of understanding social realities. The strength of this approach lies in the depth of the understanding of the points of view of different people, and the social and cultural contexts within which they live (Myers, 2013). Therefore, in-depth interview is suitable and very effective to study the ideas and perspectives of the particular groups, including the indigenous people (Seidman, 1991). Non-participant observations were applied concurrently because they provide data that could not be directly collected from interviews. They are helpful in confirming the reliability and validity of data from the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The implementation of data collection was started with a selection procedure to identify the target Batek villages surrounding the Taman Negara Pahang in Kuala Tahan. This study used purposive sampling to select 10 interview respondents from three target villages, Kampung Dedari, Kampung Pagi and Kampung Trenggan. The Batek people, descendants of Negrito are regarded as one of the earliest ethnic groups who inhabit the Peninsular Malaysia for at least 25,000 years. Among 2,000 people of them in the country, there are about 700-800 Batek people who have settled down their lives in the forests especially in Taman Negara and the nearby areas (Haron et al., 2012).

Each of the questions asked during the interviews was adapted from Labov’s (1982) evaluation model of narrative. The interview transcripts were then analysed using narrative analysis to investigate the ways of respondents’ experience through their stories telling. This analysis method has been proven its effectiveness in learning and examining the perspectives of participants in order to understand their culture experience in real life (Richmond, 2002). To record and analyse the observational data, a “double-entry notebook” suggested by Driscoll (2011) was used. The judgements and overall conclusion about the observed facts or events were made based on the researcher’s own feelings.

Results and Discussion

Forest as ‘Real Home’ and ‘Supermarket’

Indigenous people live in remote areas of the world and depend substantially on the natural resources in the ecosystem for subsistence (Khor & Zalilah, 2008). In describing their special relationship with the forest, all the Batek respondents were of the view to support the nature conservation and they regarded forest as their ‘true home’ with great dependance on the forest resources for daily needs. Although the respondents could not speak Malay language very fluently, but they constantly mentioned that the forest is important for food searching (pencarian makanan). One of them said:

I have been staying in the national park since I was born in 1985... I think it is easy for hunting and searching for food [pencarian makanan] in the forest.

In addition, the answers of the above respondent can also be related to the real meaning of monetisation to aboriginal people. He claim that money does not mean 'big thing' for the Batek, as they have never think to be rich in their lives. Harvesting the resources from their forest zones are not for the purpose to earn much money as they only wish to pursue enough livings to stay alive. He continued:

... I mean the Batek people do not need to have a lot of money. We need only the food because we just wanted to survive.

Subsequently, another respondent used the word 'supermarket' to portray the importance of this rainforest in providing variety of food sources for their community. He mentioned that his primary mode of subsistence was through gathering forest resources for own usage and sometimes selling them to earn a living. Some of the products were also used to exchange for food. This has confirmed that the Batek people are still following their ancestral traditional practices of bartering the forest produces until present times. A Batek hunter cited:

... I collect kayu wangi [gaharu wood], fruits, pine leaves, rattans, damar [resin or rosin] and others for own use. Sometimes I also sell them to Malay villagers for exchanging the salt, rice and other foodstuffs... so this forest is our supermarket!

Observations have recorded that the Batek are living within the remote forests without water and electricity supplies. Their houses look like small huts, made by bamboo, dried leaves and woods. No beds or even simple furniture inside their houses, with only mattresses that the researcher could observe. However, the Batek villages were generally satisfied and happy to stay under that condition. This is because the Batek people prefer to live in simplified surroundings as they have considered the natural environment is where they belong to.

During the interviews, they expressed positive impression towards the forest, as in the eyes of them the forest is their real home with picturesque scenery and ecological system. The lifestyle outside of the forest was considered as unpleasant with severe pollutions and high living expenses. Moreover, they called themselves as the 'wildlife' or even the 'boss' of the forest. One respondent thought:

Before the national park establishment, Batek was the only population in this area... we are the boss of the forest... with the logging activities here and there, wo where the wildlife are going to stay? The current condition of Batek is very much akin to wildlife, and we want to stay where we are originally from. But now we have lost our residences.

He described the aboriginal people are same as the wildlife whereas forest is their home as both distinctive groups depend substantively on the natural resources for survival. As time passes, the growth of human population and development activities affects the rate of deforestation. The construction in terms of roads, highways and infrastructures has seriously caused the forest degradations. The respondent stressed that "the logging activities which happen here and there have destroyed the habitat and survival of of the wild animals, forced them to move out from the jungle. We can see the number of species in Taman Negara has relatively decreased". He avowed that the wildlife and Batek people have lost their homelands. This finding has reflected the cultures and traditions of Batek which are correspondingly related to their concerns on the values of forest and the importance of nature conservation.

Knowledge and Awareness of Sustainability

To Batek people, the rainforest protection is their prime concern as it offers the very basis of survival for their community in providing them food and shelter to stay. Thus, it is not surprising that knowledge and awareness of the aboriginal people associated with natural world have been developed over thousands of years through their vast experience on environmental management. To live harmoniously with the ecosystem, the Batek are practicing their traditional knowledge in daily life, especially knowledge of taking care the forest and the river.

One of them voiced out "we protect the national park" and "we make strict control" to uphold the homeland. This reflects positive attitudes of the community towards the conservation efforts. He further

emphasised that “we do not open the front door” to elucidate on the high awareness and attempts of the indigenous tribes in defending their forest and pristine nature from the loggers and ranchers. Additionally, the river is of great importance to Orang Asli as the main source of water. In commenting about their aboriginal knowledge which is of relevance to sustainability practices, the interviewee asserted on how the villagers keep the water source clean by not throwing garbage into the river. He claimed:

We can take forest resources but we do not open the front door, if we open it widely, our living place and the national park will be destroyed... We also do not pollute the river. For instance, we do not throw rubbish into the river.

When he was asked about the reason of why the Batek choose to stay next to the Sungai Tembeling, the respondent clarified that they only prefer the small stream. He explained this river is too broad, murky and dirty for them. They experiences a problem of contaminated river water, being polluted by the garbage from the nearby Malay housing areas. As a result, the Batek respondent explained that they prefer the water source from the streams, rather than the rivers. They need clean water supply for cooking, drinking, and washing. They are concerned with the health problems of their community, where the respondent highlighted the high occurrences of infectious diseases caused by the river water contamination. He dwelled on:

We live next to the river, normally a small one. We do not like to stay next to such a big river like Sungai Tembeling... We need the water for drinking and cooking. However, Sungai Tembeling is dirty and murky with plenty of rubbish in the river. We feel that it is not secured to drink... It may cause epidemic diseases such as abdominal pain, neck pain through direct contact with polluted river water... That is why we prefer small streams with clearer water that we might get.

Interestingly, the researcher was informed on the sustainability practices of how the wildlife is protected by the Batek men. In order to sustain their community, the Batek people were aware on the importance of wild animal protection as the integral part of forest diversity. Therefore, they would only hunt the male of the species and strictly forbid their members to kill female animals for breeding purpose. At the same time, the Batek would only hunt small animals like monkeys and birds for main source of protein. However, the big mammals such as elephant, tiger and deer would be protected to prevent extinction. Another interviewee commented:

... we will only hunt the male species and do not kill the female animals... we eat only the monkey and we do not kill the big animals like elephant, tiger and deer. Actually we leave them for the tourists who come.

In other words, the Batek have shown their knowledge on sustainable living through their efforts of wildlife protection to ensure the hunting activities are well-controlled. Having said that, they performed appreciative attitudes towards the nature and they have deep understanding on nature survival as they are mutually dependent. This finding is in parallel with the conclusion made by an environmental anthropologist who argued that the forest landscape provides an important source of Batek’s knowledge and continuity since the forest pathways are where their environmental and social knowledge develops (Lye, 2002).

During the visit to the Orang Asli settlement, Kampung Dedari, the researcher was introduced with two types of traditional practices which utilise all the natural resources: blowpipe hunting and fire-making skill. The demonstrator showed the ancient technique on fire making without the use of matches and lighters where all the materials used were collected from the forest. Using a string pulled back and forth with the base that made of meranti wood (kayu meranti), the demonstrator exhibited his competencies in handling the show. Once the tinder was lighted, he would use dried woods and leaves to start a flame.

The other traditional cultural practice which utilises forest products is blowpipe hunting. Hunting forms a major component of the Batek life, especially through the use of blowpipe which is called *sumpit* in Malay language. About two metres long, blowpipe is a traditional method used for hunting the birds, gibbons, monkeys and squirrels. It is made of bamboo and the bullet or mouth piece is made from damar. Damar is a resin harvested from the dipterocarp trees. According to them, as an

indispensable part of making the blowpipe, resin is one of the most important resources, could only be found in the forest, whereas due to its value and market demand, they can sell it at a higher price. It can be concluded that through this observational proof in terms of their culture and knowledge to utilise forest resources in a sustainable manner, the Batek people have performed supportive attitudes on conservation attempts.

Animistic Beliefs

The aboriginal beliefs, cultures and traditions were also found as the prime contributors to supportive attitudes towards nature conservation. Batek people who are the mobile forest-dwellers are still beleaguered by animistic beliefs as they believe that souls and spirits do exist not only in humans, but also in all natural objects such as animals, plants, trees, rocks and other natural phenomena such as rain, sun and moon.

The findings showed that when the Batek enter the jungle for hunting and gathering forest produces, they strictly follow their animistic religious beliefs or they called it as pantang-larang (taboo) in Malay. One respondent told:

Whenever there is a big animal in front of us, we cannot laugh or make fun of it. This is our belief. We do believe that our God will be angry and punish us with thunder and lightning... Also we shouldn't talk big [cakap besar] when we saw anything in the forest. For example, if I saw the gaharu wood, I will just keep quiet and take it as my secret and luck of the day. That's all.

He continued to mention that the forests play a vital role in shaping the customs and cultures of this indigenous ethnic minority, where they will move from one place to another particularly for searching the food, or if something happens for example a death or severe illness of their family members. The Batek people also have a unique tradition of hanging the body of death on a big tree in the deep forest which is still practicing until now.

Batek do not conduct any funeral ceremony for the death people. We will wrap the body with tree leaves and barks and we do everything on a big tree... We will build a platform which looks like a canopy on top of the tree and pull the body of death up.

Another Batek respondent stressed that their unique relationship and beliefs about the forest have been well-preserved from elders to their descendants. Until recently, the Batek maintain much of their identity and they are still traditionally following the steps of their ancestors. Batek and the forest are indeed inseparable, as accentuated by the respondent through relating to the government-subsidised settlement in Kampung Kuala Atok, which is a special settlement for the Batek tribe outside of the national park.

We do not like to stay in the wooden houses outside of the forest. The place is totally different from our traditional ways of living... We cannot use the toilet that they built for us because we are not familiar with it since we were kids. We are not used to sit in the toilet; we cannot pee in the place with cover or inside the house. We used to pee in the forest, the place which is open area. This is our custom and traditions inherited from our grandparents.

Conflicting Views on Nature Conservation

The outcomes of analysis show two conflicting views on nature conservation among the indigenous people: forest protection and unsustainable harvesting of forest resources. On one hand, the Batek people showed positive perspectives on nature conservation since the aboriginal livelihood is highly inseparably and linked to the forest for food and shelter. One of the respondents earlier also viewed the aboriginal people as similar as the wildlife; hereafter he expressed disappointment at the substitution of rainforest with excessive logging activities. In the descriptions from the respondent, both Batek and wildlife have seemingly lost their homelands.

On the other hand, the Batek respondents claimed themselves as the original inhabitants of the forest lands so that they should be granted the rights over the natural resources in their territories. During

the interviews, they often named themselves as Orang Asli, which means “original people” or “first people” in Malay. They claimed themselves as the native to the lands; possessing full rights over the use of the forest resources which they have traditionally owned even before the establishment of the national park. One of them said:

As a Batek people, I have a special pass to go inside the national park... The park rangers also cannot disrupt my access to the resources. I have live in this national park since many years ago.

The Aboriginal Peoples Act (1954) permits Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia to hunt and harvest forest products from the national park for their own consumption. Concerning the presence of regulations and enforcement, however, they are prohibited from commercial hunting and selling all those jungle products to make own profit. For example, damar is one of the valuable forest products which can be sold to outsiders at a good price. Due to this, interviews with two of the Batek males have identified their dissatisfactions with the park management because they were prohibited from commercial hunting and selling the park resources to earn additional income. One of them complained:

Perhilitan has some problems with our community... If we want to sell the forest products we will definitely have problems. We are not satisfied with that.

A statement made by Teh and Nik Norma (2015) highlight that the protection of the biological resources in the Taman Negara Pahang has therefore caused a conflict between the park and the Batek community. Evidence also suggested by Gomes (2004) about the Orang Asli are the primary suppliers of forest products, such as rattan, bamboo, resins (damars), ivory and other animal parts in the maritime trade that linked South East Asia to the markets in China, India and the Middle East countries have been supported in this study. This has proven that the Batek are also practicing unsustainable activities of hunting, collecting and selling the forest products. The findings are consistent with the study of Kimbrough (2013), who claims that the balance between biodiversity conservation, natural resources utilisation and the needs of indigenous people is often wrought with conflict.

Conclusion

This study confirms that the indigenous cultural and traditional practices are the prime contributors to supportive attitudes towards nature conservation. The Batek have a strong spiritual tie to the rainforest and both creatures are somewhat interrelated as they rely upon each other. Forest gives the community not only a sense of belonging but also conveniences, as evidenced from the respondents who used the word ‘supermarket for the Batek’ to define the importance of rainforest to them. They concern and protect the natural resources within their care and they even regarded themselves as similar as ‘wildlife’ in the forest. Therefore, deforestation is not only destroying the natural resources, but also the homelands of the Batek. Protecting the forest means safeguarding their aboriginal cultural, social, spiritual, and heritage values. Essentially, their complex and diverse cultures and traditions remain unchanged for over thousands years from one generation to another.

To support this thought, Lye (2008) argues that if there were no people in the forest, the world would collapse. This verdict is related to the indigenous concept of environmental guardianship which has also been proven in this study. Being the forest people, Batek are the ones who prevent this collapse from happening because guardianship is emergent in their on-going interactions with the forest. Hence, this study recognised the essential of understanding on how the Batek communicating their sustainability practices could contribute to preserve the cultural rights of the aborigines, their ‘supermarket’ and the national park, at the same time.

However, the study also provides evidence on the negative feedbacks from the aborigines that have challenged the effectiveness of the management of Taman Negara Pahang. As the native to the national park, they have voiced out that although they were granted the rights over their ancestral lands, they were prohibited from selling the park resources to make own profit. Hence, assessing perspective of indigenous people on nature conservation by taking account their needs and opinions is fundamental in order to identify the accurate park conservation strategies to win their support for enabling the long-term conservation goals.

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