
Malaysia: Forests are much more than trees for the Semai

In national forest policy, forests usually refer to land and trees, which can include primary forests of native (indigenous) trees, forests of secondary growth and plantations of commercial trees cultivated by the state or private enterprises. Forests can also refer to trees planted for reforestation or soil conservation, after primary or secondary forests are logged. Forests are seen as containers of physical resources which are commodities for sale.

People's views of forests are much more holistic, including the physical resources in forest areas and their spiritual and historical connection to those areas. They include land, trees and non-timber products, such as medicinal plants, herbs, fruit and nuts, forest animals and forests material used for housing, craft and furniture.

For the Semai settlements, one of the 18 ethnic subgroups officially classified for administrative purposes, within the Orang Asli indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia, the land is a "living entity, with spiritually and a sacredness of its own" as it is documented in the recently published Handbook on Gender, Forestry and Rural Livelihoods, by Vanessa Griffen "Seeing the Forest for the People".

The land provides assurance for their continued survival, food, clothing, medicines, fuel, and all materials necessary for the existence. The land is also the schoolhouse of their children and the resting place of their ancestors. Like most of Orang Asli and other indigenous peoples, the Semai depend on their resource base --the forest-- for most of their subsistence needs.

Animals, fish and birds provide much of the protein in the Semai diet. Their variety --more than 41 different species as sources of protein-- ensures that no one in particular will be hunted beyond sustainable levels. A more reliable source of food is the variety of fruits and vegetables available from the forests. The Semai have begun to cultivate some of the 38 different fruit-bearing trees wild species, especially those whose fruits have commercial value. But the most reliable source of food are vegetables: at least 51 species of traditional vegetables are known to the Semai.

The Semai use a variety of plant matter (roots and bark extracts, leaves, juices, etc.) for their medicinal and health purposes. Through intelligent observation and trial and error processes over generations they have gained the knowledge of the medicinal properties of more than 35 different plants.

At least 45 other different types of leaves are needed to be collected and arranged, used or burnt, for the ritual of the Semai healing ceremony (kubuq), an essential component of their spirituality and worldview. The Semai not only have a material dependence on the land but they also share a spiritual relationship with it: it gives life and meaning to their whole being, it contains their history and identity and ensures their viability as independent people.

Therefore, it is to be treated with respect and must be kept in balance. Disrupting this balance will only result in tragedy, not just for the environment but for the people as well.

Article based on: "Seeing the Forest for the People, a Handbook on Gender, Forestry and Rural Livelihoods", Vanessa Griffen, APDC (Asian and Pacific Development Centre), 2001.