

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

How fossil fuel is harming Malaysia's indigenous communities

Fatimah Zainal · Wednesday, May 4th, 2016

To say that the Malaysian electricity sector's dependence on fossil fuel sources is rapidly increasing would be an understatement. It is simply rocket-fuelled. 94.5% of electricity is generated by using fossil fuel such as oil, natural gas, and coal. And that was seven years ago. Now, amid the ascending tenor of the nation's development, there is no reason to believe that the trend will be reversed, as the TNB noted that the demand for electricity will increase 3% to 5% each year from 2010 to 2020.

[The Earth League](#) says that 75% of fossil fuel needs to be kept in the ground in order to mediate climate change. Malaysia's equatorial location makes it suitable for solar power, while its forests can supply it with ample biomass. Despite it, the nation continues to rely heavily on fossil fuels, under the self-serving rhetoric of "national development" and the good of the "mass civilization". Under these "developmental" projects, the nation is too occupied with courting capitalist movements to notice the impact that climate change will have on the nation's proud diversified cultural vortexes, particularly on the indigenous communities.

This is because wherever there are environmental crises, the biggest charge is upon the purse of the poor and the marginalized. Farmers, fishermen, plantation and industrial workers, indigenous peoples living in the forest, and people living near industrialized zones are those most affected by environmental changes.

Over the years, Malaysia has been hit with an unprecedented climate change, responsible for the slew of extreme weather conditions and environmental disasters occurring across the nation such as El Niño, floods, and landslides. As a result, lives are lost, homes are destroyed, and traditions are eroded, as basic human rights such as the right to life and security take the backseat to national interests.

Life everywhere in the nation is being shaped by climate change. Currently, thousands of children in Kedah and Perlis are kept home, unable to pursue their education as schools remain closed due to the brutal heat wave. But for the indigenous people, or the Orang Asli, who place their identity with land and nature, the impact of climate change goes even deeper than disrupting their daily lives.

For [Orang Asli communities](#) all over the nation, from Peninsular Malaysia to the East Malaysia, their subsistence way of life, age-old traditions, and centuries of generational knowledge are currently at stake due to climate change. This means that around 11% of the Malaysian population or approximately 2.1 million people are having their basic human rights violated. Orang Asli, who live with the wisdom of living in harmony with all living beings, depend on the Earth's natural resources not just for their physical subsistence, but also their spiritual survival.

This is why Malaysia needs to break free from fossil fuel.

Climate change, fostered by relentless excavation and burning of fossil fuel create many effects

that dovetail together to paint a horrific picture of the future for the indigenous communities if the nation continues its' heavy dependency on fossil fuel.

Here's how.

1. Climate change threatens the life of the indigenous communities. According to the latest [Asia Report on Climate Change and Indigenous People](#), the loss of traditional livelihoods has led to food insecurity among indigenous communities.

In Malaysia, many indigenous communities make their living by collecting natural produce from the jungles such as honey, *durian*, *petai*, resins, incense, rattan, and *rafflesia* buds, then selling them in order to eke out an income of about **RM100 (approximately \$25)** a month. They also engage in hill rice cultivation and hunt, fish, and gather. Animals such as wild boars, *sambar* deer, and Malayan porcupines are hunted for the Orang Asli's own diet and consumption.

However, climate change has threatened the forest biodiversity, making survival more difficult. Rivers are drying up. Orphaned animals roam the jungles, with no place to call home. And out of the 500 local plants with medicinal purposes registered in the 1960s, more and more of them are being lost to climate change. Meanwhile, the bellies of our earth are still being excavated for its' precious fossil fuel.

Climate change was also responsible for the unprecedented floods that hit Malaysia in December 2014, which caused many indigenous communities being cut off by flood waters. Orang Asli are the most vulnerable to extreme weather conditions, because they do not have the same resources that most Malaysians have, such as transportation and cash incomes.

A message that the indigenous people put forward in the Asia Report includes, "Security of land, territories and resources of indigenous peoples is critical for effective climate change solutions."



Orang Asli children having food after a helicopter delivered supplies near their village during the flood. -Photo by Bernama

2. Age-old traditional knowledge and practices are in danger of being extinct, before they can be passed on to the next generation of Orang Asli. Biodiversity loss is threatening the centuries-old traditional medicinal knowledge and practices of the Orang Asli. This is because many indigenous species of seeds and plants, animals, and local medicinal plants can no longer be found in the forest. Due to climate change and biodiversity loss, some of the traditional medical knowledge was lost with the previous generations.

The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) reported that about 80% of the world population still depends on traditional medicine to cure diseases. Climate change means that about 90 groups of Orang Asli in Malaysia, who each have distinct languages, cultures, practices, and knowledge, are in danger of losing some of the most important traditions that they have had since time immemorial. Medicinal plants such as *tongkat ali* (*eurycoma longifolia*), *kacip Fatimah* (*labisia pumila*), and *gajah beranak* (*goniothalamus macrophyllus*), are depleting.



A woman from the Jahai tribe out with her child on a trip to gather forest produce; a common activity for the Orang Asli. -Photo in BH by Muhd Zaaba Zakeria

In Peninsular Malaysia, local scientists discovered that many of the medicinal plants used by the Jah Hut tribe have potential in curing liver problems, treating tumors, and even usable for anti-aging purposes. This means that the preservation of these herbs along with the traditional

knowledge on how to utilize them can contribute to further researches in the field of medicine. Thus, climate change is not just endangering the survival of traditional medicinal knowledge among the Orang Asli; it also threatens further developments in ethnobotanical and ethnomedical researches. The preservation of the plant species used by the Orang Asli would also lay down important inroads towards developing all-natural remedies for treating diseases.

“Traditional knowledge systems of indigenous peoples are crucial in combatting climate change,” is another message put forward by the indigenous communities to States and Parties in the Asia Report.

3. Socio-cultural changes stem from problems brought by climate change. According to the Asia Report, women are mainly responsible for water and kitchen duties. The depletion of water sources due to climate change means that women have to walk longer distances to reach other sources of water, resulting in them being exposed to sexual assault.

In 2008, the Bruno Manser Foundation (BMF) revealed the sexual abuse of Penan women happening in the interiors of Sarawak. Workers from timber companies preyed on Penan women and targeted the female students who had to travel far away from home to get to school.

With the alarming rate of the drying up of water sources, it is not unlikely that these tragedies will again occur, as indigenous women are forced to put themselves in danger; travelling miles away from the safety of their homes to get water, thus exposing them to predators.

Another lifestyle change is migration. Due to climate change, the government initiated a massive project to build a dam to produce clean energy. But its poor planning ended up displacing around 10,000 indigenous people. It disrupted the hunter-gatherer and nomadic lifestyle of the Penan, who now struggle to support themselves on tiny plots of land.



Hundreds of people from the Penan tribe blocking the road leading to the Murum Dam site. – Photo by The Borneo Project

4. Climate change would threaten the religious practices of the Orang Asli, whose understanding of religion has a strong nexus with the natural world. Many indigenous tribes are animistic, whereby their religion is based on the tenets of guarding the nature, respecting the spirit within all living things, and fostering a common destiny among the indigenous people to care for the natural world.

The Temuan tribe celebrates Aik Gayak Muiyang to thank their God and ancestors for the crops they grow. The Dayak people celebrate Gawai Dayak, a thanksgiving day to mark the milestone of a bountiful harvest and a time to plan for the new farming season or other future endeavors. And in the same vein, the Kadazan-Dusun celebrates Pesta Kaamatan, a harvest festival to express their contentment and gratefulness.



The Mah Meri tribe celebrating Ari Muiyang in Pulau Carey, Malaysia. -Photo by EPA

But these religious and social celebrations which are centered on celebrating the natural world and its bounties will no longer have the same far-reaching joyfulness it once had, if climate change is not stopped. For how can the Orang Asli, who is deeply rooted to nature in their religious beliefs ever be able to fully enjoy the freedom of practicing their religion once the most defining part of it has been irreparably damaged?

In the insightful words of Malcolm Fraser, “Solutions will not be found while indigenous people are treated as victims for whom someone else must find solutions.”

So, ideally, indigenous communities all over the world need to be given higher visibility and included in policy and decision-making processes performed by political actors and their power networks, which include energy companies.

Energy companies operating locally should also be held accountable for their actions and policy makers should no longer be given free rein over which companies are given extraction contracts, in order to curb mismanagement as in the case of [BP](#), [Chevron](#) and [ExxonMobil](#).

The traditional knowledge of the Orang Asli has the aptitude to fight climate change, because they have instrumental as well as intrinsic knowledge that others do not have on how to manage the land that they have occupied; long before it even became parts of a nation. By discrediting the ways of the Orang Asli, Malaysia risks losing some of the most tangible and cheapest solutions in tackling climate change.

Top image: A girl from the Penan tribe, one of the many indigenous communities struggling to sustain their lives amid developmental projects and climate change. Photo from [Penan](#).

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 4th, 2016 at 12:20 pm and is filed under [Discourse](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.