

Project Update: February 2014

Bidding 2013 farewell and welcoming the New Year!

New Year's greetings from Sabah, the land under the wind! We want to thank all of you who have helped make 2013 a successful year for the Kinabatangan River Spirit Initiative!

2013 has given us a better understanding of the context in which we work, and the challenges that lie ahead. We have had to scale down our efforts, but this has allowed us to build stronger relationships and refine our methodology. In 2013, we established ourselves in the Lower Kinabatangan among local communities, and garnered support among government agencies. We established partnerships with local NGOs, community-based organisations, and academic institutions, who are and will continue to be, integral in the success of the Initiative.



Left: 3 community forums were held to introduce and discuss the project, with participation from 4 villages. Right: 16 community members from 4 villages were trained and carried out interview surveys with villagers from 6 communities.

Interview surveys have been completed, and the analysis of results is in progress. In November 2013, we started collecting regular water quality monitoring in Sukau in collaboration with HUTAN / Kinabatangan Orang-utan Conservation Programme.

The Initiative's efforts were recognised when it received the ZACC Conservation Grant at the 2013 ZACC, held in Blank Park Zoo, Iowa, USA.

In November 2013, we presented our project at the Heart of Borneo conference in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Preliminary findings relating to sharks and rays in the Lower Kinabatangan were presented to the Department of Fisheries Sabah, Malaysia in December in lieu of Malaysia's National Plan of Action on Sharks and Rays.

In addition, we have been working with Danau Girang Field Center / Cardiff University and the University of Malaysia Sabah to investigate the population genetics of the giant freshwater prawn and the impact of agricultural pollution on this important food source. This project is ongoing.



Left: 20 sampling sites were set up in Suksu and the Wildlife Warden & Conflict Mitigation Team (WWCM) from HUTAN/KOCP were trained to monitor 6 physical and 2 chemical water quality parameters. Right: Exactly like Nemo.

Outlook for 2014

We enter 2014 with a more focused approach. We will complete community mapping of local ecological knowledge relating to fish (including freshwater prawns, sharks and rays) in at least two villages; establish fish sampling teams and methodology for at least two villages; and conduct regular fish and water quality sampling in at least two villages.

On a more species-oriented level, we hope to gather more in-depth information relating to the status and utilisation of shark and ray species in the Lower Kinabatangan and adjacent estuary. Furthermore, we would like to investigate further the red tail gourami, endemic to eastern Sabah, and possibly in threat of extinction.

“It’s exactly like ‘Nemo’ ...”

Conversations with local folk in Sukau in late 2012 sparked stories of an orange/yellow-and-black striped fish, which is seen no more in this village. Found alongside floating debris or by the formerly common ‘floating outhouses’, these tiny fish would turn up during the dry season. Many recalled hot lazy afternoons spent swimming in the river, trying to catch these stirring little fish with their bare hands.

Armed with contradictory descriptions by local folk (“it’s just like ‘Nemo’, with a cigarette-like body, long, round, small, short, spiny...”), and tales of the same fish still found in a downstream village (Abai), we set up in search of the elusive “Nemo”. We were excited to find a small goby (*Brachygobius sp.*) surfacing by a floating log in Danau Pitas in Abai. We managed to scoop it up and snap some pictures, and then we set the little guy free. However, after digging around Fishbase and other fish identification sources, its identity still baffles us.

Worst still, not everyone agrees that this is the fabled “Nemo”! “It is the same but not quite...” – So, the search continues!!!

Silent extinction

Long ago, large sawfish prowled the river. Through the 1970s, the *Parangan* or the largetooth sawfish were so often seen; they would get tangled up in fish nets stretched across the river. In those days, it was not unheard of for mere short stretches of river to be blocked off with 15 or 20 nets laid from bank to bank. And with just a little whack on the head with an oar, the ‘sensitive’ sawfish would expire. It wasn’t like people really liked the taste of its meat, but as is the way of fishing communities in Sabah, if you catch it, someone will eat it.

By the start of the 1990s, the *Parangan* caught got smaller and smaller, and at the turn of the new millennia, they were just a big fish story. Today, people still ponder about where the sawfish went. Some believe the river got so polluted that they just swam away to find a new home. Others think they are hiding somewhere in the Kinabatangan, just waiting to make their comeback.

It is hard for local communities here, as well as the Malaysian community at large, to believe that anything (especially a fish!) can go extinct, especially from human pressure. We may never be able to say for certain what did them in, but we cannot let other species (moreover endemics!) follow the sad way of the *Parangan*.

