



Tourism & Conservation in Kinabatangan

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The Kinabatangan, winding through a length of 560 km, is the longest river in Sabah. It drains the forests in the central and eastern interiors meandering through a floodplain, which contains probably the richest concentration of wildlife in Malaysia - before discharging into the Sulu Sea on the East Coast.

Its riverine swamps and floodplain together with about 20 ox-bow lakes support a diverse community of wildlife with at least 50 mammals, which include 10 species of primates and 27 species of bats, more than 200 species of birds (including 8 hornbills). There are 90 species of fish, and an astonishing 1,000 different plants.

I have been fortunate enough to visit the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary on numerous occasions over the past 10 years and every time it has been a very rewarding experience. Easily spotted are the enigmatic proboscis monkeys and the long-tailed and pig-tailed macaques. Bearded pigs also roam the plains of Kinabatangan, and they are a fairly common sight. More elusive are the red-leaf and silver-leaf monkeys, and Bornean gibbons, and of course, the 'king' of them all, the orang utan.

Rare primates aside, the lucky visitor will also have the chance for an encounter with the Borneo pygmy elephant. I have been lucky to see them in three out of my last four visits in 2008/09, and these encounters have been truly unforgettable.

HORNIBILLS ARE LIKE ANY OTHER BIRD IN BORNEO. So it's funny how visitors gasp in awe when they see flocks of hornbills streak across the forest or river expanse in search of fruit whereas the locals won't even bother to look most of the time, unless they are guides. One can often hear the staccato cackles of the oriental pied hornbill or the resonant trumpeting calls and noisy flapping wing-beats of the magnificent rhinoceros hornbills in jungle treks or sometimes near a lodge. The rarer white-crowned hornbill can be seen from the riverside.

The oriental darter is a very common bird of the waterways, often seen perched on bare branches drying its wings. Unlike most other water birds, the oriental darter lacks oily waterproofed feathers, hence the need for frequent drying of its water soaked feathers.

Normally in waterlogged areas, large trees do not grow as rapidly due to poorly oxygenated soils, but the soils of the Kinabatangan floodplains are quite fertile. Fig trees (about 20 species have been

Left: River Cruise, Kinabatangan. Below: Resting Crocodile, Newborn elephant makes a river crossing.



recorded) are abundant, supporting hornbills and as well as many species of mammals that feast on their fruits, including the orang utan.

Another resident is the stork-billed kingfisher often seen on overhanging tree branches by the river before it dives head-first into the waters in the pursuit of its daily fish diet.

IT IS NO WONDER THAT THE KINABATANGAN REGION, especially around Sukau, is popular with eco-tourists. This is mainly because the forests of Kinabatangan are refuge to the greatest concentrations of proboscis monkey, and large concentrations of Borneo pygmy elephants and orang utans. However, part of the habitat has been badly affected by logging and oil palm plantations, fragmenting the ecosystem, which is a clear threat.

Over the past decade, an increasing appreciation and heightened awareness of declining biodiversity worldwide has triggered tremendous growth in ecotourism, making it a globally significant industry.

THE BASIC CONSERVATION ARGUMENT for promoting ecotourism – laid out in the 1990s by David Western, former director of the Kenya Wildlife Service, is that when local people benefit financially from employment stimulated by the tourism sector, they have a greater impetus to conserve rather than exploit the natural resources upon which ecotourism is based.



The examples most frequently heralded as successful ecotourism include the Galapagos islands, Kenyan safaris, and gorilla viewing in Rwanda. In all of these ventures ecotourism is providing substantial benefits to protected area conservation, as well as substantial revenues to local and national economies. In fact, in these areas ecotourism has been shown to be far more profitable than competing land uses like timber harvesting, cattle grazing or hunting.

How has tourism in the Sukau area developed in an ecotourism context?

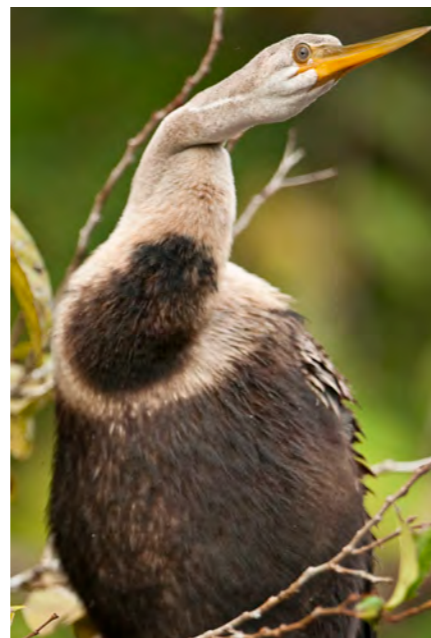
During my last visit to Sukau the lodge manager commented "The great number of eco-tourists coming here makes it important for the government to improve and implement conservation programmes in Kinabatangan. Without eco-tourism there would be less pressure for action on the ground". I personally believe that the development has been sustainable, the lodges in the area are mostly constructed with local materials, as in the case of locally handcrafted wooden boats, and many of them are only employing locals. The Sukau Rainforest Lodge was listed in National Geographic Adventure's 'Top 50 Ecolodges 2009'. Most of the lodges donate a fixed amount per visitor to local community and conservation projects.

In an attempt to spread the tourism income more evenly between the local Orang Sungai, a home-stay and boat owners cooperative has been established.

IT IS HOPED THAT A SUSTAINABLE ECO-TOURISM INDUSTRY in Sabah will further encourage conservation and limit the logging and expansion of oil palm plantations that has been a curse in the past and remains a threat.

Specifically in the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary it has been my observation that a reasonable balance has been achieved between development and conservation, and certainly the quality of wildlife to watch is still of exceptional calibre.

Go and see it for yourself! 📷



Above: Stork billed kingfisher, Kinabatangan; Oriental Darter.

HOW TO GET THERE & WHEN TO VISIT

Most of the eco-lodges are situated around the small village of Sukau around 2-3 hours drive from Sandakan. Some tour companies prefer to take clients from Sandakan by boat along the coast and upriver, which for first time visitors is an exciting experience. There are direct Air Asia flights to Sandakan from Kuala Lumpur.

I normally stay at Sukau Tomanggong Riverview Lodge run by North Borneo Safari, who have some of the best guides in the area for birding and photography. The lodge consists of 10 very simple twin bed rooms, located on the banks of the river next to the local WWF office.

Climate is hot and humid by day and pleasantly cool by night, it is best to visit outside the 'wetter' season from October to February, and when mosquitoes are generally not a problem.

TEN QUESTIONS FOR ECO-TRAVEL

1. Ask the lodge owner if they have a written policy regarding the environment and local people. If it's not written down ("yeah, yeah, we do all that stuff") then it probably means they are not taking it seriously.
2. Ask them to describe the single contribution to conservation or local people that they are most proud of.
3. Ask them how they measure their contribution to conservation and local communities.
4. Ask the lodge owner how many local people they employ, what percentage this is of the total, and whether any are in management positions.
5. Ask them what they have specifically done to help protect the environment and support conservation, and which local charities they work with.
6. Ask them what percentage of products and services are sourced from within 25km of the lodge.
7. Ask them how they treat waste water (coral and other wildlife is being destroyed by Caribbean hotels pumping effluent out to sea, for example) and how they heat their building (solar is better than firewood, which can contribute to deforestation).
8. Ask them what information and advice is provided to tourists on local cultures and customs.
9. Ask them if they employ guides from the local community. Local guides not only provide unmatched insights into local cultures but are also aware of areas/behaviour that might cause offence among local people.
10. Ask them for ideas on how you might get involved with local people and conservation in a worthwhile and rewarding way for you and the destination.