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## Going Home

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

Johann Lim '18 is a History and Government dual major at Claremont McKenna College from Singapore. In addition to environmental issues, he is passionate about education and intends to teach high school after graduating from college.

## Going Home

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**Abstract:** In this reflection, Johann shares how the people he met on the trip (faculty, student fellows, activists and the indigenous people we lived with) furnished him with a lot of knowledge about his home country and the surrounding region and in the process shattered some misconceptions. He also contemplates how the experience prompted him to reevaluate his role as a consumer, activist, and future educator.

Going back home to study environmental issues presented me with not just mixed feelings, but also intellectual ‘disruptions’ as I knew that some of my long-held beliefs about my country were about to be changed and possibly even shattered. I believed I became even more cynical when it came to Singaporeans, our pragmatism and the environment. Watching the Singaporean NGO Peoples’ Movement to Stop the Haze present on their campaign after we had returned from our four-day trip to Sarawak, I could not help but feel that it was a movement borne more out of a reactionary opposition to the effects of deforestation (the haze) as far as it affected Singapore than of a strong opposition to deforestation itself and the adverse effects on biodiversity and the world. And yet, I could not help but realize that until the trip itself I had only been concerned with the environment in issues that directly affected me and even then only when it adversely affected me and not vice versa. This was just one of many occasions where I realized that not only had I been quick to judge others, but also that I may have overlooked my own involvement.

I also realized that as a group, I considered myself to be less of an activist than most of the fellows. This made me reflect on the duality of our roles as activists and academics and how to balance the two. Having spent so much time together with the other fellows, I definitely felt that over the days I was slowly but surely becoming more of an activist as well as becoming increasingly liberal on environmental issues. There is an old adage that says “you are the average of the five people you spend the most time with” and while that definitely played a part in stirring up the activist in me, I believe that it goes beyond just social influence and into a self-generated rationalization on my part about the injustice of certain redevelopment projects.

The continuous learning and contemplation was made possible by the constant interactions and conversations that we had with the faculty from both the Claremont Colleges and Yale-NUS College. On top of being able to know faculty on a more intimate and personal level, I also benefitted greatly from the wide variety of perspectives and knowledge bases, which each faculty member possessed. It was like having ‘Office Hours’ throughout the days and nights, even when we were in the jeeps, on the plane or in the boats! This ties in with the multidisciplinary approach which EnviroLab Asia seeks to achieve. I was treated to a variety of impromptu field experiments and informal lectures during the course of the trip. This ranged from Professor Penprase pointing out the stars and describing the various constellations to Professor Marc Los

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Huertos having me assist in taking the various measurements of water quality and Professor Harley sharing with me about how she had used art to communicate religion in her past work. The different intellectual approaches to the issues that we were grappling with not only revealed the many angles which I could approach an issue but also equipped me with new paradigms which I can use in my studies. It was also comforting to know that I still retained a fair bit of what I learnt in my high school science and geography classes. I found that the multidisciplinary approach does pose a challenge in terms of being able to integrate and balance such a wide variety of fields but also brings enormous benefits in terms of not just learning new knowledge but also looking at old knowledge in new ways. With regards to my own fields of study of history and government, I was particularly interested in the legacy of the British colonial authorities on the legal partition of land and the formulation, enforcement and evasion of government policies respectively, as well as the interactions between the state and federal government. Besides being a throwback to my 10<sup>th</sup> grade History classes in Singapore, it also encouraged me to delve into environmental issues of Singapore, especially with regards to the effects of British colonial rule on the environment in Singapore, which is now the topic of a research paper for one of my classes this semester.

The trip furnished me with an enormous amount of knowledge and perspectives regarding environmental issues in Southeast Asia. I believe that I now have a rudimentary and new understanding of matters of sovereignty, sustainability and development. I consider my knowledge rudimentary as while these were issues that I had previously studied back in high school, the narrative I received then was starkly different and in some aspects even openly conflicting. For example, hydroelectric power was described as this great alternative to ‘dirty’ fossil fuels (while conveniently skirting past the impact on biodiversity) and that economic development was this necessary stage for a country to survive. This trip has demonstrated to me that while the previous narrative I learnt may still be true, it is not the full picture. Sovereignty, for example, is still a concept very much in flux in my mind, which is probably a fairly accurate description of my take on environmental issues currently. Besides the various policy issues, I also benefitted from observing and even participating in a different form of activism and social change, such as the physical blockading of the dam construction site. This civil disobedience of dubiously legal orders was unlike anything that I had previously encountered and the courage and ingenuity of the indigenous people truly inspired me. Besides the lessons in life and living (e.g. the ‘kampong’ spirit of the Dayak people), I intend to bring the general narrative, the stories of the indigenous peoples’ struggles and the implications of these environmental issues to the community in Claremont and back home in Singapore.

Still, it is unrealistic to believe that I can spur and cultivate an inert environmentalism in my fellow Singaporeans any time soon. In fact, it would be haughty to say that by virtue of having gone on a clinic trip and studied environmental issues for a few months that I am an environmentalist myself, let alone able to turn others into environmentalists. Yet, I hope that through the sharing of my perspective, be it as an active citizen or a future educator, I will be able to at least plant seeds of environmentalism into the minds of my loved ones and friends and eventually have the environment be a pillar of our national conversation. I hope that we will not only examine how Singaporean companies and individuals are complicit in causing the haze but also understand how everyday Singaporeans can make a difference through our purchasing decisions, such as simply inspecting the products that they purchase. I believe that is realistic.

I believe that we covered the ‘micro’ level of the issue quite thoroughly in our sustained interactions with the Dayak people and others ‘on the ground’. For our return to Southeast Asia, we should touch base with them and follow up with the issue. Nevertheless, it is imperative that as academics we attain the full picture and an array of perspectives as wide as possible. This will firstly entail speaking to Sarawak state officials behind the dam and local palm oil plantation owners to find out their rationale behind the dam and deforestation respectively. We should then branch out to other less visible stakeholders in these issues, such as the other ASEAN member countries that will tap into the energy from the proposed mega dams and the Malaysians not living in the jungles of Sarawak. Ironically, it was during an unplanned interaction of the trip when I received a timely reminder on the need to be objective and to take a step back from the strong emotional experience that we have had bonding with the indigenous people in Sarawak. It was during a CMC alumni reception in Singapore where I encountered a Malaysian Palm oil plantation owner after we had presented on our clinic trip. He essentially disagreed with our framing of the issue. I realized that his input was not just valid but also extremely relevant. This made me aware of the dangers of sliding into ‘groupthink,’ especially among our group of research fellows who were already similar in ideology and concern for the environment.

It is impossible to single out the most important thing I gained during this trip with so much learning, growth and self-evaluation taking place in so many areas, be it ideological, intellectual, national, and emotional among others. The clinic trip was one experience that will remain firmly etched in my memory. Not only that, the perspectives and experiences I gained will shape my future actions as a consumer, academic and citizen of Singapore and of this world.