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What Does “Sustainable Development” Mean?

Grace Stewart '17
Claremont McKenna College

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Cover Page Footnote

Grace Stewart is a 2017 graduate of Claremont McKenna College, receiving her Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Analysis: Science. She served as the first student intern for EnviroLab Asia in the summer of 2015, and during the 2015-16 school year was a research fellow for the Arts and Communication cluster. She is pursuing education and outreach-related work in the field of environmental conservation, after which she hopes to attain a graduate degree in environmental policy. She is passionate about conservation and climate change mitigation for the well-being of people and ecosystems for generations to come.

What Does "Sustainable Development" Mean?

Grace Stewart¹
Claremont McKenna College

Abstract: A recurring theme throughout the EnviroLab Asia clinic trip to Singapore and Malaysian Borneo was the concept of "sustainable development." In this essay, I explore my own thoughts and concerns regarding this phrase, such as the tension that exists between "sustainability" (the maintenance of resources) and the conventional concept of "development" (which consumes resources and can often wreak environmental destruction). I reflect on this tension within the context of environmental issues faced by the Dayak people in Sarawak--the building of the Baram Dam, and the prevalence of oil palm plantations.

In January 2016, I participated in a clinic trip to Singapore and Malaysian Borneo with a cohort of students and professors from the Claremont Colleges and Yale-NUS College. The main question that arose for me throughout the trip was that of sustainable development. Does the model of development automatically mean urbanization and subsequent environmental destruction? Or is there an alternative model of development that allows quality of life to increase while protecting the environment? I was also intrigued by the mindset that urban is implicitly good and rural is implicitly bad. I witnessed the pressures of globalization felt by Malaysia as it tried to meet development goals via construction of hydroelectric power (in our case, the Baram Dam). We realized that this dam project seemed to function more as a symbol of Malaysia's modernization, rather than an actual service to the people.

On our trip, I had the chance to meet with a variety of people and organizations, all of whom contributed to my understanding of environmental issues facing Southeast Asia. My experiences in Borneo, compared to my other abroad experiences in Singapore and Germany, definitely differed the most from the United States experience I have grown up with. I was very humbled to have the opportunity to meet the Dayak people in Borneo; they were hospitable hosts, welcoming us into their homes and feeding us incredible meals. I was able to experience their culture through observing and participating in song and dance with them. Through this intimate experience over our few days with these communities, I by no means understand the depth and complexity of their struggle (with the government and corporate powers that reign), but I definitely got a small glimpse into their lives and the beauty of a land and culture at risk due to the overriding drive to develop through oil palm plantations and hydroelectric dams.

Out of all the meetings we attended throughout the clinic trip, I was especially struck by our conversation in Singapore with Wilmar's senior manager for sustainability. Wilmar, Asia's leading palm oil company, has also been the leader in trying to promote sustainable agribusiness practices. This fact

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was pleasantly surprising to me. However, I was a bit concerned by their definition of sustainability and their goal to continue increasing production to reach one million tons of certified palm oil in 2016. It is an example of a concept I explored further in my course with Professor Zayn Kassam (who also attended the clinic trip) titled *Divine Body: Religion and the Environment*--conceding that the Earth is in desperate need of more sustainable business practices, but at the same time holding to a model of economic development that has led to the trend of "green growth." This phenomenon involves stamping a "green" seal of approval on products (such as RSPO--Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil--certified products), with an overall goal of continuing to increase production and consumption so that profits continue to increase, and as a result the GDP will increase. While these goals are not inherently bad, I had to wonder how increasing production and consumption (which would no doubt increase the amount of oil palm plantations) could be considered "sustainable." That being said, I am hopeful that Wilmar's supply chain mapping and "no deforestation, no peat, no exploitation" policy will benefit the environment and that their push for sustainability will rub off on other companies and industries. It is definitely a step in the right direction. As a side note, to add to the complexity of this meeting, we were informed that palm oil is one of the most efficient oils to process (compared to other vegetable oils), and its popularity has increased largely as a result of the relatively recent ban on trans fats. I am interested in further exploring how palm oil can either be justified or refuted as a replacement for trans fats and other oils based on health, economics, and environmental impacts of production.

A surprising and slightly troubling moment on the trip occurred when I realized that there is conflict even among the Dayak people regarding development. Some people want a lifestyle similar to that in America, whereas others want to maintain traditions and continue to live off the land. I heard a similar narrative throughout the trip that the Baram Dam was more an issue of indigenous land rights than environmental protection. This made me wonder if the indigenous people still would have wanted to protect the environment even if their interests weren't directly involved. Regardless, I saw how they were facing an injustice by a government that failed to acknowledge their rights, and their struggle to be recognized and heard is valid and honorable.

EnviroLab Asia has a goal to be multidisciplinary, and this experience definitely incorporated multiple disciplines. I am majoring in Environmental Analysis, but have also taken extensive coursework in music, and both of these backgrounds proved useful and applicable throughout the clinic trip. I remember saying to some other fellows near the end of the trip that our participation in Dayak song and dance one evening at a longhouse felt like I was embodying an experience straight out of my ethnomusicology class, *Music Cultures of the World*. This is just a single example of experiential learning, a welcome departure from my usual classroom learning. Additionally, to see issues from a scientific perspective, Professor Marc Los Huertos brought along water quality equipment and explained the issues facing the Baram River, including stratification and lack of dissolved oxygen.

Through my experiences in Borneo and Singapore, I realized that sometimes just knowing the right thing to do will not naturally lead to the right thing being accomplished. More precisely, it is not enough to have scientific evidence for environmental management best practices. Good policy is also required to work in tandem with science. And in the event that good policies don't exist or are not being executed correctly by the government, advocacy by environmental and social justice organizations like Save Rivers is necessary and worthwhile. I discovered that civil protest is an effective means to fight harmful government actions (or inaction), an inspiring act of hope and perseverance.

I knew coming into the trip that environmental issues are some of the most complicated problems the world must face today. So it should come as no surprise that I encountered a vast array of factors to consider while observing the environment in Southeast Asia. Before joining EnviroLab Asia, my knowledge of environmental issues in Southeast Asia went as far as knowing the orangutan is from this region (Borneo and Sumatra) and is a threatened species. Yes, I indeed observed firsthand the destruction wrought by deforestation in Borneo leading to unabated habitat destruction and rapid biodiversity loss. But I also experienced the trials of the indigenous people, the political battle and power struggle occurring between the people and their government, and the tangible repercussions of the landscape’s degradation manifesting as Singapore’s air quality/haze issue. I am increasingly grateful for my interdisciplinary education, and I have begun thinking about all the actors that need to come together to address the injustice faced by particular groups of people and by the planet.