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Just Research

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Cover Page Footnote

Ki'Amber Thompson is a first generation college student from San Antonio, Texas. She is an English Literature and Environmental Justice double major at Pomona College. She is interested in health, wellness, and healing through food and community. In the near future, she hopes to enter into a PhD program in Geography or Environmental Studies.

Just Research

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Abstract: the trip to Malaysia Borneo was an eye-opening experience that reinforced the need for researchers to listen to the indigenous peoples and to integrate their knowledge and understanding of place into any scientific, political, or policy analyses designed to restore the impact of deforestation and dam projects in the region.

During the four-day clinic trip to Malaysian Borneo as an EnviroLab Asia research fellow, I conducted on-the-ground research on dam-building, oil palm production, and deforestation, especially as indigenous peoples interact with these projects. I lived with and learned from the Dayak peoples, specifically the Kayan and Penan, about these the various environmental justice issues that they were facing. This was 100% a new experience for me because I had never been out of the U.S. I approached the trip with cultural humility since a large portion of our research was talking with and listening to the indigenous residents. The physical journey of travelling by truck and by boat to the various remote villages was incredible. On this journey, I experienced the strong sense of community of those that were guiding us. On day two of the Borneo trip, I remember feeling at ease in the longhouse we were staying in because of the warm smiles and amazing hospitality. Seeing some of the environmental issues first-hand and staying with the Dayak peoples of Borneo in their villages and talking with them about the environmental, socio-economic, and political effects of the palm oil industry, the Baram dam project, and deforestation was all eye-opening for me. Listening to the perspectives of those most subjected by deforestation and dams complicated the potential solutions.

This experience changed the way I think about conservation. Oil palm deforestation and large damming projects like the Baram Dam is a conservation matter. However, I learned that conserving the forests, the land, and water also means conserving culture and heritage. By clearing the forests, the customs and culture of the indigenous peoples that live in the forests are also being destroyed since they depend on the materials from the land to make crafts and instruments that are important to sustaining their culture. Phillip, an indigenous activist of the grassroots NGO SAVE Rivers, explained how by destroying and cutting down the forests, the people's culture is also being destroyed since they depend on the materials from the land to survive and to practice their cultural traditions.

I think that if we are serious about environmental conservation and want to do it in a way that is just, then we have to include the voices of indigenous peoples. The Dayak peoples understand *place*, the value of the land, and their relationship to the land in a way that the

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Malaysian governments do not. Therefore, their knowledge and interests must be included in decisions on the development, use, and conservation of the land. This experience has led me to new ideas of what conservation is and what it can be, making me think seriously about what my role in the conservation field could be and what I want it to be. I have also been able to utilize this experience in thinking about the cultural conservation practices and conservation tools indigenous peoples in North America have used and how they use them. My short time doing research in Malaysia has informed so much of my interests, the kind of research I want to continue doing (community-based research), and what justice means and could look like in the context of environmental conservation.

After the trip, I thought more critically about our research, considering how *research* can be a dirty, even violent, word in some cultures. Indigenous populations have often been treated as *objects* of study for the purpose of confirming what researchers think they know. Moreover, the research fails to give anything back to community the researchers take from. Thinking critically about what research means and what it means to be a researcher has made me re-evaluate how I think my team and I should proceed with the knowledge that we gained in Malaysia. How can we do community-based research in a way that distributes benefits and risks fairly and in a way that is concretely supporting the community? I want the stories of the Kayan and Penan to be handled with care and I hope that what we decide to do with our research benefits those communities that graciously embraced us into their homes, their culture, and their struggles.

Mostly, I listened. I learned that when doing research with indigenous peoples, listening is essential. A significant portion of the research trip was collecting these oral stories. Stories are central to the kind of work and research that I am interested in and want to continue to do. Stories humanize. And these stories and the way that we choose to tell them is critical to constructing solutions to our environmental, social, and economic issues.

So thank you to the Kayan and Penan who shared their stories with us, and for all the work that they are doing to make their voices heard.