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Adaptation and Power

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Cover Page Footnote

Elizabeth Weinlein graduated from Pitzer College in 2017, double majoring in Environmental Policy and Asian Studies. For the next year, she has committed to working with the Americorps FEMA program in Baltimore, Maryland. After Americorps, Elizabeth hopes to join the Peace Corp and eventually pursue a Master's degree in International Relations.

Adaptation and Power

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Abstract: Academic knowledge of some of the inequities and injustices embedded in economic development was given greater depth and significance after the EnviroLab Asia clinic trip to Southeast Asia; the same was true result occurred after the group's meeting with Dyack activists.

I was first educated on the local and global consequences of economic development my second semester of college. Elementary school taught me about Native Americans and high school history classes explained imperialism, however, my education lacked the depth and breadth that college provided. Through an environmental justice course titled "Progress and Oppression", I studied the conscious and unconscious erasure of indigenous peoples through industrial development and globalization. Most readings victimized indigenous groups, overwhelming me with the inevitability of globalization and the consequences that follow: displacement, exploitation, destruction of culture and traditional ways of life. Solely text based, the class provided no opportunities for first hand experiences with the communities who were affected by rapid local and global development. At the end of every class I was disheartened, not only by the narratives I was reading, but also by my perceived inability to make meaningful change as someone who was not directly impacted.

Awakened to the privilege and power of being an American student at an American university, studying distant issues through the lens of scholarly materials, I began to question my role as a student and an activist. How can I work to fix the injustices of the world without first hand experience? Am I capable of understanding and implementing the remediation of environmental concerns when I have never been to the country in question or have never studied a group's culture? Even if I have the opportunity to research indigenous communities abroad, where is my place in conducting said research?

In September of 2015, I joined EnviroLab Asia, a newly established group promising intersectional discussion between disciplines and a chance to conduct field research in Singapore and Sarawak, Malaysia. In the months leading up to our flight, our group of students and professors collectively researched Southeast Asia, focusing on palm oil's intersections with social structures, politics, transportation and the indigenous people of the region. Fresh water biologists, economists and environmental students shared knowledge and collectively, we formed a substantial information base, yet I wondered if it would be enough.

Before arriving in Sarawak, I grew increasingly wary of the next couple of days. Palm oil is a controversial product that is both the most efficient vegetable oil and a threat to Southeast Asia's ecosystems. As consumers, our EnviroLab group is part of the problem, as American consumption patterns demand excessive amounts of palm oil products like packaged bread and soap. I also wondered how a group of American college students and professors would be able to gain insight in such a short period of time, while simultaneously being respectful to the land and the people hosting us. I was open

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to the experiences that lay before me, yet, I was wary that we were going to be perpetuating unjust power relations, staying with indigenous groups who are being taken advantage of by government bodies and international business. And what could we do, coming and leaving within a three-day period? Even if we were able to share our knowledge, would it be imperialistic, us imposing our Western ideas and biases on an area we have little knowledge about?

Stewing over these thoughts, we arrived in Malaysia and were immediately introduced to Phillip and Charles. They are Dayaks (one of the many indigenous populations of Sarawak) and activists who had organized our stay. Assigned to four wheeled drives, we headed into the heart of Sarawak, into palm oil plantations and timber forests. Talking to local community members and observing their livelihoods, I recognized my miscalculated thoughts, as these community members were not victims. Yes, international businesses threaten their way of life. Yes, government powers actively give them the short end of the stick. Yet, this community adapts and fights back, conducting research tours with giant “Stop Baram Dam” stickers plastered on their cars, wearing “Protect Native Rights” shirts, and being outspoken activists for their land rights and livelihoods.

We drove through expansive blankets of palm oil plantations, taking in the mono cropped oil palm occasionally disrupted by patches of exposed soil or degraded land. Pulling into a blockaded palm oil plantation, a group of indigenous activists greeted us. They recalled their story, describing how a palm oil company disregarded the indigenous populations historical land rights and stole their land. In response, they reclaimed their land, blockaded the entrance and barred the company from entering or exiting.

Back in the cars, we continued on, no longer on paved roads. We curved off the main highway into second growth forests shrouded in mist, eerily similar to those of Jurassic Park. We came upon another blockade site, this one designed to obstruct the creation of the Baram dam. An indigenous long house was built on the site and was plastered with articles and signs that promoted political allies and highlighted activist accomplishments in the region. From the road, neon banners hung, forcing every timber driver, indigenous person or possible dam constructor that drives by to see the demands of this community: “Stop Baram Dam”.

After our EnviroLab Asia group headed to bed, wrapped tightly in sleeping bags with mosquito nets haphazardly draped over our bodies, locals filed into the long house. I couldn’t see or understand what was happening on the other side of my room’s wall, but the energy of the forming group was palpable. Conversations rose and fell as the meeting carried into the night, and the activism continued on without the foreigners.

The people we met are not victims, but people who adapted to their situation by actively fighting and winning substantial gains for their community. The indigenous communities of Sarawak are organizing and opposing powerful groups while maintaining traditions that they feel are important. Our group of students and professors came to Sarawak to learn from indigenous communities to share their experiences and better understand the complex environmental issues of Southeast Asia.

