

The view from the forest



A mosaic of habitats, Indonesia.
Photo: Douglas Sheil

All too often, the people who decide what's good for forest communities are not the communities themselves, but outsiders who have little understanding of how the communities see the world. That's precisely what's happened to the small Batak community on the island of Palawan in the Philippines. "There have been many development projects, but they haven't always responded to the real needs of the local people," explains CIFOR Manuel Boissière, an ethno-botanist seconded to CIFOR by the Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD). "When the projects have failed, those running them have accused the Bataks of being lazy, instead of blaming themselves for their lack of understanding."

In 2006, Boissière and CIFOR colleague Nining Liswanti joined forces with a team of local researchers to explore the complex relationships between the indigenous Bataks and their forest environment, and their uneasy relationship with the migrant communities who dominate the coastal zone in Tanabag District. Using Multidisciplinary Landscape Assessment (MLA), a methodology developed by CIFOR in Indonesia and several other

countries, the researchers explored what matters most to the Bataks, in terms of landscape, resources and environmental services.

The forests are profoundly important to the Bataks, both as a source of food and a means of earning a living. Hunting, gathering non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and swidden cultivation are practised with great sensitivity towards the environment. The Bataks have banned the cutting of trees along river banks and many sites are protected from disturbance. But the forests – and the Bataks – are threatened by the activities of outsiders. "They were particularly worried about people cutting trees, collecting NTFPs like rattan and honey – which provide them with an income – and fishing with poisons," explains Boissière.

But can research such as this make any practical difference? Philippe Guizol, a CIRAD forester seconded to CIFOR, believes it can. Guizol is leading an EU-funded project, 'Levelling the Playing Field', which seeks to establish processes which will help people to make rational decisions about forest management and resolve conflicts between different interest groups. Tanabag District is one of the research sites, and it was Guizol who invited CIFOR's MLA team to provide an assessment of the Bataks' perceptions and priorities.

"The MLA exercise has given us a much better understanding of what matters to the



Batak women discussing the importance of different landscapes. Palawan, Philippines. Photo: Manuel Boissière

Bataks,” explains Guizol. “It has also revealed how marginalised they are.” When the Bataks are invited to attend discussions about development projects, they are generally represented by one of two intermediaries whose views often fail to reflect those of the community as a whole. The MLA team has recommended that researchers and decision-makers should go to the Batak villagers and deal with them alone, rather than in the company of the dominant migrant community. The Levelling the Playing Field researchers will now do this.

The MLA research also suggests that the Bataks need be consulted on matters which, at first sight, don’t appear to involve them. For example, migrant communities are exploring ways of improving their incomes by growing crops such as cashew nuts and flowers. This may well involve the building of a new dam which will draw its supplies from the watershed where the Bataks live. “This

means that the Bataks will need to be involved in any negotiations about downstream agricultural developments,” explains Guizol, “and it raises the possibility that they might be rewarded for protecting the forests upstream.”

Guizol believes that the MLA research could also influence the authorities in the district capital, Puerto Princessa. “Some influential conservation organisations are keen to protect the forests using the old-fashioned technique of excluding people from certain areas,” he says, “but the research has revealed how important these forests are for the livelihoods of the Bataks, and this is now recognised by the mayor.” The research has shown that the Bataks have their own sophisticated systems of conservation, and Guizol hopes that the authorities will accept that conservation should mean working with the people who live in the area, rather than expelling them from their forest homes.



Reviving interest in Vietnam’s forests

Had you visited Khe Tran village before the Vietnam War, you would have been left in no doubt about how important the forests were to the local people, and how knowledgeable they were about the fauna and flora. During the war they were forced to flee, and by the time they returned in 1992, the forest had been much degraded by bombing and the area was – and still is – scattered with ordinance. The government encouraged the villagers to settle near the main road and grow rice and tree crops. They were forbidden from using the natural forest which their ancestors had used. Home to several endangered species, including tiger and Edwards’s pheasant, it was set aside as a protected area.

In 2006, CIFOR published the results of its research on the perceptions of the Khe Tran villagers. This was part of a three-year collaboration with Swiss Development Cooperation, conducted in partnership with Tropenbos International–Vietnam. “We discovered that a lot of forest plants no longer had any known use for the local people,” explains CIFOR biologist Piia Koponen, “and those which do are mostly linked to cattle feeding.”

The research suggests the villagers have lost their affinity for the forests, and no longer take any interest in how it is managed. “Although hunting and other activities are forbidden in the forests, people often come to poach endangered species and cut timber,” explains Manuel Boissière. “If the villagers see them, they simply let them do whatever they want.”

The research has practical implications which could well apply to other villages which are situated on the edge of protected areas. “One of our main recommendations to the conservation authorities is that they should involve local people in the management of the forests and hire them as rangers,” says Boissière. “If that happens, then the villagers will financially benefit, and they’ll no longer turn a blind eye to poachers and illegal loggers.” In short, it would be a win-win situation: good for the locals and good for wildlife.

MLA survey in Khe Tran village, Hue Province, Vietnam. Photo: Douglas Sheil