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## TWO WORLDS COLLIDE

**How construction in Japan is driving destruction in Malaysia's last rainforests.  
Will Japan change its ways ahead of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics?**

Few people would associate Tokyo's iconic skyline with the rugged rainforests of Malaysia, but the rise of one is literally being built on the fall of the other. Major construction sites across the city contain the remains of one of the world's most imperilled rainforests.

As Japan prepares to host the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, eight new venues will be built, part of an expected construction boom. Japan has committed to making the Tokyo games a model of sustainability, but the current practices of its construction industry raise questions about its ability to deliver.

Japan imports more plywood from tropical forests than any other country, which feeds its huge construction and housing industries. Half of this comes from the rainforests of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. Sarawak is losing its tropical rainforests faster than anywhere else on earth, driven by a timber industry riddled with corruption and illegality.

This exposé, the result of a multi-year investigation, explains how Japan's construction industry is sourcing from major Sarawak logging companies which are well documented to have been involved in illegal and massively destructive logging in the state's vanishing rainforests. It also details the plight of indigenous communities on the front lines of a long and sometimes violent struggle to prevent logging in their ancestral forests.

### **A culture under siege**

Thomas Pelutan's village of Long Sepigen sits on a spur of the Selungo river, which flows through the mountainous interior of Sarawak.

The village is a closely knit cluster of wooden houses, raised on stilts several meters from the ground. Thomas' wide veranda looks out onto small farms and valleys of dense rainforest, whose high ridge lines catch the last light of day.

Beneath this veneer of tranquility is a fanfare of sound – the violin-like strings of empress cicadas, the cackle of hornbills, and the hypnotic whoop of gibbons ring out above the quiet cacophony of the forest's more modest inhabitants.

Thomas was born in these forests and considers them the ancestral home of his tribe, the Penan. Traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherers, today nearly all Penan communities have settled in small villages like Long Sepigen, but rely on the bounty of the forest for their daily needs.



Leaves are used to sand wood into blowpipes or boats, to weave roofs, or to make balms that cure illness. Glues from plants are used to trap birds, and toxic latex poisons the tips of hunting darts.

The Penan's forests are steeped in memory and cultural significance. Old growth trees bear marks made from the latex tapping of ancestors, sometimes a century old. All plants are considered sacred, with souls just like humans, and landmarks like streams, caves, or rapids hold spiritual meaning.

These communities are now encircled by a network of crude dirt roads carved into their forests, and industrial machinery, poised to move in. Their land is one of the last frontiers for Sarawak's insatiable logging industry.

#### **Caught On Satellite June 2012**

The state of Sarawak, which is around half the size of the UK, is a disproportionately big player in the tropical timber trade. It exports more tropical timber each year than all of Africa.

The Sarawak government has long tried to deflect criticism of its forest policies, claiming that its logging industry is sustainable. But keen-eyed satellites tell a different story.

Malaysia's Borneo has the world's highest rate of tropical forest loss. What was once an uninterrupted green canopy of intact rainforest is now a shrinking island, rapidly being replaced by logged out scrubland and agricultural plantations.

Put end to end, the sprawling network of logging roads carved into Sarawak's rainforests over the past three decades would be long enough to circle the globe twice.

#### **The Business of Destruction**

This devastation might suggest that Sarawak's logging industry was out of control, but it has been well choreographed. The logging companies have unofficial backers in the highest levels of state politics.

Until his resignation in February 2014, Sarawak's Chief Minister, Abdul Taib Mahmud, presided over the allocation of land and timber licenses for 30 years. During this time Taib, members of his family, and other cronies are believed to have amassed huge personal fortunes. A culture of backdoor deals, bribes and kickbacks permeates the land and forestry sectors.

*They are actually squatters on the land because the land doesn't belong to them, it's government land..."*

Taib's first cousin Norlia Abdul Rahman talking about indigenous communities on hidden camera



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Taib's successor, Chief Minister Tan Sri Adenan Satem, has surprised many by recently acknowledging the extent of the corruption and illegality in the forestry sector, and pledging to combat it.

While this offers hope for reform, recent satellite imagery of logging operations previously hidden from the world shows the staggering scope of the destruction taking place.

Samling and Shin Yang are two of Malaysia's biggest timber companies, with operations that span the globe. Both are major suppliers of timber products to Japan. Their largest logging concessions sit within the Heart of Borneo, a cross-border conservation initiative between Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, covering some of Sarawak's last areas of intact rainforest.

Within the Heart of Borneo, Shin Yang is decimating over forty soccer pitches of virgin rainforest a day, in an area the Sarawak government has proposed as a national park.

Nearby, Samling is rapidly expanding its destructive logging in forests claimed by the Penan, and appears to have made recent inroads into an existing national park.

A closer look at these companies' operations using high resolution satellite images raises questions about their compliance with Sarawak's forest laws, particularly in light of past reports documenting illegal activities.

Neither company responded to Global Witness's request for comment on these allegations, although Samling has in the past refuted allegations of illegal logging.

