

# Local Community Empowerment in Sustainable Forest Management



**Portrait: Pak Nikolaus Sukur, Chairman of the Village Forest Management Unit (LPHD) Sungai Melayu**

Belaban Rayak, West Kalimantan

**Pak Nikolaus Sukur walks along the periphery of the Belaban Rayak Village Forest in Sungai Melayu, reminiscing about the forest that once stood when he was younger.**

*"Under the canopy of the countless trees lining up throughout the hills of Belaban, our grandparents would come to this area after an exhausting day of cultivating crops, which was set up as Tembawang by our ancestors many generations ago. They would take a rest in the shadow while enjoying some of the many unique forest fruits-types growing here, planted by the locals for their families and children,"* he said with a face expressing a mixture of nostalgia and concern.

The name of Belaban Rayak Village Forest carries the symbolic representation of traditional aspirations and identities of the local Pesaguan Dayak tribe. 'Belaban' is the name of a large wooden tree in the forest that represents heaven, where the ancestors worshipped and respected the spirit of the forest ruler, while 'Rayak' means big.

*"A belian (Dayak spiritual leader) would typically place various offerings at the base of the Belaban tree in the hope that the nature will grant its blessing, allowing humans to live in abundance, peace, and harmony with the forest, until the time that our souls are summoned back to join our ancestors in a vast, lush paradise filled with fruits and clear rivers,"* asserted Pak Nikolaus with vision.

The Dayaks, known for their migratory hunter and gatherer lifestyle, have traditionally practised shifting cultivation when moving from one location to another in search of food. As they waited for the harvest, they would plant seeds and fertilise their fruit trees with organic materials gathered from the forest.

That is how Tembawangs were created, fostered by local communities throughout West Kalimantan.

From the *Memorum doun memangkah dohan* ceremony when the tree begins to bloom to the *memandian pansai* ceremony when the fruits appear, the Dayak people of Sungai Melayu performed at least seven series of traditional buah - galau (fruits) ceremonies. Sadly, these traditional fruit agro-forests are now quickly disappearing due to frequent fires and increased demand of the local communities for plantation land.

As an elder and chief of the Pesaguan Dayak tribe, Pak Nikolaus is concerned about the indigenous people who are becoming increasingly estranged from their roots. This is influenced in part by the fast modern lifestyle, which reduces the younger generation's awareness and concern for the forest and the local wisdom of Dayak people. With time, the sacredness of the forest is diminishing, as the forest is no longer revered and protected by its people.



“Now that the forest is not what it used to be, I can only pray that it will recover so that the future generations can enjoy it in the same way we and our ancestors had.”

A glimmer of hope appeared when Bumitama, an oil palm agribusiness company operating in the Sungai Melayu village, and the non-profit organisation Earthqualizer helped the local community with the social forestry scheme application to the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK). This collaboration in implementing sustainable land use initiative will support the indigenous community in managing and restoring the forest areas over the period of 35 years.



**Tropical Pitcher Plants (Kantong Semar) or *Nepenthes campanulata***

With it came the opportunity for Pak Nikolaus and the people in the local village forest management unit (LPHD) to manage the 3,383 hectare state-owned forest. This also the chance to fulfill his dream of fully restoring the ecosystem functions of the once-mighty Belaban Rayak forest, to provide food and fresh water for its people and habitat for wildlife.



**Traditional Long Knife of the Dayak People**



**The Canopy of the Belaban Rayak Forest**



**Left to right: Janrahman Simarmata, Conservation Assistant and Yoga - BBCP Field Operation**

**Monitoring of Flora and Fauna in the Forest Areas**

Pak Nikolaus, who was chosen to be the leader of the LPHD, worked with Bumitama and Earthqualizer and formed a plan for sustainable management and reforestation of the village forest with provisions of sustainable alternative livelihoods for the local people in mind. Agroforestry is practiced in designated forest areas and allows the community to protect wildlife biodiversity while gaining economic benefits.

With the goal firmly set, the initiatives have begun since 2020. Aiming to stabilise and restore the vanishing forest cover. LPHD and its partner Bumitama, have set annual reforestation as their primary focus. Besides the forest trees like mahogany and sengon, the reforestation will utilise trees known to produce fruit with high economic value, like durian, longan, avocado, guava, jengkol, and even coffee and cocoa which have become highly sought after in markets beyond Kalimantan.

**“ AT THE END OF 2022, MORE THAN 14,000 TREES HAVE BEEN PLANTED, SPREAD ACROSS 47 HECTARES INSIDE THE VILLAGE FOREST. ”**





Yoga - Watermelon Farmer



Left to right:  
Slamet Ardiansyah, CSR Assistant of  
Sungai Melayu & Agus - Watermelon Farmer  
at Belaban Rayak

### Collaboration between Bumitama and the Local Community in Watermelon Farming

In another area, allocated for sustainable farming, the joint group KUPS (Social Forestry Business Group) developed a watermelon farm. Their leader, Pak Agus, left his business as a palm oil middleman (*tengkulak*) to help raise community interest in the village forest management. In a 4 hectare section that was burned in the devastating 2019 forest fires, the KUPS grows watermelons, intercropped with crystal guava and avocados.

Bumitama supports this effort with training, seedlings and planting equipment. With their product sold at the markets across the Ketapang district, the first year's harvest of 120 tons of watermelon resulted in around 600 million rupiah in revenue for the 20 farmers involved in this programme. With this encouraging start, LPHD and Bumitama will continue supporting new and existing initiatives as its long-term co-management partners.

"When more people join to reforest the village forest areas to allow them to harvest diverse forest crops on a regular basis, we hope that LPHD will become self-reliant and will no longer require financial assistance," Pak Nikolaus explained.



Andi Muhammad Amin  
Bumitama Conservation Manager

Besides providing the community with seedlings, technical assistance and fertiliser for planting, Bumitama also helps with equipment and infrastructure, such as installation of hydraulic pumps for irrigation, and also the renovation of the LPHD secretariat building completed in September 2022.



Pak Andi Muhammad Amin, Bumitama's conservation manager, said, "It is our hope that this initiative would encourage more participation from the community under the LPHD command to be independent while benefiting from the well-managed forest, triggering more efforts to further restore and protect it. Once the newly planted trees start bearing fruits, we also anticipate more people will want to contribute in the reforestation programme with enthusiasm."



The Newly Inaugurated LPHD Office



The highest priority in forest restoration focuses on areas surrounding sources of freshwater, rivers and waterfalls. Besides providing drinking water supply as one of the essential ecosystem services for the community, if well-managed and cultivated, these areas could also offer high ecotourism potential.

Leveraging on the attractiveness of these areas has been the approach of the LPHD-affiliated Social Forestry Business Group and the Pasak, a local youth organisation for eco-enthusiasts. "We want to encourage the younger generation to appreciate the forest by involving them through tourism activities like camping or forest patrolling. We hope that Belaban Rayak forest can serve the locals and people from distant areas to recharge and relax from the fast modern lifestyle," said Pak Nikolaus. Taking notice of their interest, Bumitama with its partners have allocated a budget to develop an ecotourism area in Bukit Maloy, which offers a waterfall and beautiful views of savanna-like green hills.



#### Indegenous Fruits Trees Planting for Forest Restoration

Despite some encouraging signs, there is still a long road ahead, before the community is fully and actively engaged in the management of the social forestry programme. The Regional Head of Bumitama's operations in Sungai Melayu, Pak Rudi Ismanto sees the key to success is consistency, capacity building, and collaboration. "Through this social forestry co-management, we invite all parties, including LPHD, the local community, the village government representatives, NGOs to be actively involved and contribute through their respective roles with the spirit of mutual cooperation, for the benefit of the people of Sungai Melayu. Succeeding in our goal depends on our ability to collaborate effectively."



Stefanus Makifer - LPHD Staff Belaban Rayak, Sungai Melayu



An ancient Dayak proverb "*Duan kulate, ilih steme*" which means "Take the mushroom, leave the trunk" is a subtle reminder from the ancestors that a sustainably managed forest will provide benefits to people who nurture it. With the help of Bumitama and the growing interest of the people of Sungai Melayu, Pak Nikolaus is one step closer to realising his vision of *Belaban Rayak*. A place that provides for the needs and hopes of local citizens, just as it used to do when his ancestors lived here.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration has become the fundamental part of a successful partnership. While Bumitama may provide the necessary funding, expertise, training and connection; the indigenous people with their deep and abiding connections to the land are the ideal guardians of the forest. With the social forestry gaining partnership interest from wider communities, the positive momentum needs to be utilised to grow more successful programmes that help locals to improve their livelihoods in a sustainable manner that provides for a greener, healthier environment.



Sceneries of the Bukit Maloy and Belaban Rayak Forest