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Paddling the Baram

By LEONG HON YUEN

River journeys are always exciting, like this eye-opening expedition via the Baram River.

IN the book, *A Stroll through Borneo*, British writer James Barclay wrote of his adventures in the deepest jungles of Sarawak travelling by foot and canoe. More than three decades later, Ashleigh Seow, 55, is planning to follow in his footsteps, or rather, paddle steps.

"We are on a fact-finding river expedition to replicate a voyage that was done in 1978," explained Seow, who led a six-day river expedition with 14 other members of the Malaysian Nature Society. "We are going to canoe from upper to lower Baram River to see how people live."

It might also be the last time anyone would be able to travel via this river.



In it to win it: Competitors raring to begin the race to the finish line 5.5km away at Baram River, Marudi, Sarawak. - LEONG HON YUEN

Malaysia's second longest river – the 466-km Baram in northeast Sarawak is the site of a proposed dam, one of 12 hydroelectricity power dams to be built by the state government and Sarawak Energy Berhad. The dam will create a 389 sq km lake slightly more than half the size of Singapore, submerging longhouses, native customary rights land and cultural heritage.

"If the dam is built to its full capacity, a part of the middle and the lower parts of the upper river will be flooded," explained Seow, adding that the expedition also sought the views of the riverine communities.

This writer joined the expedition in Long Semiang, where we travelled by longboats to Long Moh as guests of 63-year-old Bilong Tingang.

"We always have certain ideas of longhouses but to actually live amongst the natives is an eye-opener," said 65-year-old Pasupathy Jayaraj, who slept on the verandah.

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Hani Nordin, 35, was pleasantly surprised to see well-maintained longhouses, with generators and washing machines.

"I was under the impression that the natives were very timid when in fact they were the ones approaching us," said Fiona Hassan, 31. "Some of them even spoke English and were eager to learn the language."



Sarawak's ethnic tribes arrive bedecked in their stunning native costumes.

After Long Moh, we were to continue to the middle Baram River, famous for its raging Grade 4 rapids (high, powerful, irregular waves) and home of Sarawak's annual Ulu Baram Whitewater Rafting Challenge.

But there was a problem crossing the rapids safely due to the condition of our boats.

"Seow was unhappy with the size of our longboats the first day we arrived here," explained Pasupathy. "Being too light, they would definitely not get us past the rapids."

Due to the rescheduled Baram Regatta that now clashed with the expedition, there were neither boats nor boatmen available.

The Long Moh boatmen agreed to take us to the next village at Long Silat, but they too had no boats. We also had arrived unannounced so we were facing a night without shelter. Fortunately, we were warmly invited to stay at the village chief's home.

After navigating barely 31km of the Baram by longboat, we were told the next morning that we had to continue the remainder of our journey by road, thereby avoiding the treacherous rapids.

Our 223km route through logging and oil palm estate tracks was so rugged that two of our three 4WD cars had tyre punctures even before reaching the town of Long Lama.



The Belait Layang-Layang ferry takes five minutes to cross the Baram River.

The following morning, we were en route to Marudi for the Baram Regatta 80km away, by express boat – these have reinforced steel hulls, are

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crocodile-proof and can fit 75 passengers.

Although Long Lama is downstream of the proposed Baram Dam, there were fears that the dam would jeopardise the express boat services.

“One of the residents said he was afraid that if the Baram Dam was built, it may affect the express boat services between Long Lama and Marudi, like what happened in Kapit,” recalled Carolyn Marsh, 40.

Due to the drought, boat services between Kapit and Belaga towns were suspended after stretches of the Rajang River became too shallow to navigate. Kapit and Belaga residents claim the impoundment of the Bakun Dam had worsened the situation by diverting water from rivers to its lake.

The Baram River was also prone to fluctuating water levels according to Philip Jau Ding, 52. “From what I’ve heard, due to logging activities the river is shallow,” he said. “And according to the express boat drivers, during the dry season in 2009, the boats couldn’t reach the Long Lama jetty.”

Following strong opposition from the Orang Ulu natives – about 20,000 of them would be displaced as a result of the project, the Sarawak government put the Baram Dam on hold.

“We want to put a total stop to the dam. A great majority of the longhouses don’t want the dam,” said Jau who chairs the Baram Action Protection Committee.

Captain (R) Philip Wan Kalang, 55, disagreed.

“This is what we have been dreaming for Long San and upper Baram,” explained Captain Wan, head of communications of the People’s Volunteer Corps (RELA) from Long San to Lio Match. “We have been requesting this (from the government) since the 1960s to have 24-hour electricity.”



Members help to change a busted car tyre.

The proposed Baram Dam has the capacity to generate 1,000MW of electricity.

“Diesel is very expensive,” he continued. “In Miri, household electricity costs RM200 a month, whereas in Long San each household has to spend RM500 each month to run their own generators.”

But Long San, with a population of about 4,000 people is one of the villages that may be affected by the proposed Baram Dam.

“At the moment, the Sarawak government’s experts are doing the survey,” said Captain Wan. “We don’t know if Long San is (going to be) underwater.”

And if it is, Captain Wan proposed to move the entire village to higher

ground.

"We don't want to stay in one place together like (Sungai) Asap," he said of the resettlement area for natives displaced by the Bakun Dam. "We want the government to (relocate) all schools and airport to higher ground. Same area, higher elevation. We don't know if it can be done or not. Let the government survey it first."

At Marudi Town Square, Chief Minister Pehin Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud told the 10,000 strong crowd at the 1Malaysia Cultural Night that the feasibility study of the dam was almost near completion.

"The development of Baram hydroelectricity project will develop the potential of Baram, which is still considered an underdeveloped region, to become more prosperous and progressive in future," Taib promised.

But will development come at the cost of submerging native culture?

"We have been living in the Baram for hundreds of years," said Jau. "We have evidence, attached emotional importance to our cemeteries, historical sites like the fort at Long Akah."

While most of the expedition members feel Baram Dam should not be built, a few of them were more pragmatic.

"To talk about saving culture is not realistic," said Kang Ching Hong, 43. "It's going to happen, dam or no dam. Most importantly, if the dam happens, make sure there are proper programmes to assimilate the natives into society, provide them with employment and treat them well."

Seow believed that the river expedition was successful in some ways.

"I think we can say that the primary objective of seeking the views of the local people about the dam and observing the changes were achieved," he noted.

As for following in Barclay's river journey, the expedition missed out on only half of middle Baram, but possibly the most exciting part of the river expedition. In the end, canoeing the Baram turned into an almost 590km journey by longboat, express boats and 4WD!

The historic Regatta

In the early 19th century, warring tribes occupied the Baram region and headhunting was rife. As the British Resident of Baram, Charles Hose was sent to broker peace. He invited all the feuding tribes to compete in a paddle boat race or regatta on the Baram River with festivities that would last six days.

In 1899, about 6,000 natives arrived at Marudi (then Claude town) in 16 war boats, each boat carrying between 60 to 70 men, and raced in the regatta. Before the great warriors returned to their respective longhouses, Hose held a successful peace-making ceremony.

Today, the historic Baram Regatta is still celebrated in Marudi but only once every three years. In the three-day event this year, 100 boats from Kuching, Saratok, Brunei, Sibuti and Baram participated in a total of 40 races.

For the first time in the history of the regatta, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei was invited to be the guest-of-honour.

The Brunei Sultanate and Baram are historically linked. Baram once belonged to the Brunei Sultanate, before it ceded to Charles Brooke, the second Rajah of Sarawak on June 13, 1883.

On the final day of the Regatta, the Sultan piloted a Black Hawk helicopter, and touched down at Marudi airport.

He flagged off a race in which the prize was the prestigious HRH Sultan of Brunei Champion Trophy. Jayong 9 Belaga, through its Unlimited Men B team emerged as the winner.

When it was time to leave, the Sultan waved to the crowd who patiently waited outside the airport to see him off.

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