

WRONG



INDONESIAN BORNEO: Australian-backed research supports what many have long argued – modern life is unhealthy. Scientists are comparing the lifestyles of traditional Punan tribespeople with their urban counterparts. They're finding there's no contest when it comes to choosing between the old ways and the new.



Villagers, such as Lu Wenfang and her husband Zhang Peng, are impressed with their vegetable quality and improved yields since they've been using the natural fertiliser. Holding freshly picked prize tomatoes from her greenhouse, a delighted Zhang Peng says, 'These are best eating.'

Another side of the community development project covered environmental management. Villagers have learnt about desert vegetation and the need to encourage regrowth. They continue to build fences to keep livestock away from delicate areas and tend newly planted grasses, shrubs and trees.

Two years on from project completion the ongoing benefits are clear. Villagers are pleased with the support from local and provincial governments. There's a general sense of achievement and wellbeing among villagers – many helped design and implement the project. And there's more. Sand storms are fewer and less severe due to extensive revegetation, farming is more rewarding and, with the new cement houses, home is definitely more comfortable.

ABOVE: Tan Sen with newly-born twin lambs bought under an AusAID-funded community development project. Photo: Ma Zhigang/AusAID

Scientists, including from the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), are comparing two Punan communities of the same origin, language and culture. One group follows traditional ways of hunting and gathering in the deep forest. The other lives an urban lifestyle in the mining and timber town of Malinau, near the Malaysian border.

Most Punan gravitate to urban centres, seduced by the trappings of so-called 'civilisation'. It's a migration that's occurred over

the past 30 years as 'progress' threatens forest boundaries. 'They want modern life, they want to wear t-shirts and jeans and drink Coca-Cola, they're attracted to all these things,' says Edmond Dounias from CIFOR, 'but they underestimate what it will cost them in terms of their way of life, their culture and the benefits they gain from the forest.'

According to 2003 statistics, only 4,500 Punan are traditional hunter-gatherers, roaming the lowland forests of East Kalimantan.

WAY – GO BACK



And of these many are less nomadic than their forebears. Semi-traditional Punan live in remote hamlets and their forays into the forest for vegetables, wild boar and herbal medicines are usually more seasonal than daily.

But, according to CIFOR, even a modified traditional forest lifestyle is better than the 'modern' life of urban Punan. Once they arrive in Malinau, for example, they find it hard to cope. They may live in houses with electricity, wear Western clothes and drive

on tarred roads but working in the coalmines or in the lucrative, but illegal, logging industry is bewildering and stressful. That's if they manage to get a job. Many Punan are discriminated against or find they don't have the skills to adapt to work routines. Consequently, healthcare – one of the prime motivations for moving to town – is unaffordable and they're exposed to social problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse.

No longer able to rely on the rich resources of the forest larder

many Punan are also developing poor eating habits. Instead of a varied and highly nutritious diet of bushmeats, berries and roots, urban Punan tend to eat rice and low quality meats. Rather than snacking on healthy treats from the forest floor they eat fatty processed foods like potato chips and commercial cakes. The result is many Punan are overweight and developing health problems, like heart disease and diabetes.

'What's happening to the Punan who leave their forest

ABOVE: A Punan man still living a fairly traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle cooks a dish of forest ferns.

Photo: Edmond Dounias/CIFOR

LEFT: Iban warrior – East Kalimantan is home to several tribal groups, including Iban, Punan and Banuaq. Photo: Sarawak Tourism

COMMUNITY HALLS

INDONESIA: In the still of the morning in Aceh, the sound of hammers tapping drifts across the landscape.



communities is a tragedy,' says Greg Clough, a former AusAID officer now attached to CIFOR. 'They're losing not only their cultural values but also their foraging and hunting skills. In Malinau, the roast boar on the dinner table is more likely bought from the local market than brought down in the forest.'

Scientists hope their research will persuade the Punan to go back to forest life – and those already there, to stay put. CIFOR is playing its part. In an effort to stop them coming to town it's working with local authorities to take medical supplies to remote Punan hamlets.

Greg Clough is optimistic the research will influence government policies over land use, particularly in Kalimantan where precious forests are under threat. A big part of the problem is widespread illegal logging. Irresponsible commercial interests, as well as poor land-use decisions by government officials, are pushing indigenous people to abandon the land on which they've lived for centuries. 'These findings will help authorities make more informed choices. They will see how forest felling impacts on local people.'

Edmond Dounias agrees. 'Authorities often feel improving the lives of remote tribespeople means moving them into the

modern world while our research shows the reverse is true.'

Governments, aid agencies and non-government organisations now 'have proof that taking the advantages of modern life, such as dispensaries, to the people in the forest and not vice-versa – will help preserve a diminishing culture as well as provide better development outcomes.'

It just goes to show reducing poverty and improving health and wellbeing are sometimes best achieved by going backwards – not forwards.

The Australian Government, through the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), provided CIFOR with over \$600,000 in core and project funding in 2004. Australia's overseas aid program recognises the importance of scientific research in providing a sound basis for designing and delivering aid initiatives that save lives, reduce hunger and improve welfare among the world's poorest people. CIFOR's research into the health of the Punan also received considerable support from the French Institute for Research and Development (IRD).

ABOVE: Punan in the deep forests of East Kalimantan – following even a semi-traditional forest lifestyle has health benefits. Photo: Edmond Dounias/CIFOR

As the tropical heat builds, young men clamber over a wooden structure, piecing together what will become the hub of their village – a new community hall.

Here people will socialise and discuss the day's business.

'The tsunami swept away more than lives and buildings. It destroyed the social fabric of entire villages,' says AusAID's Allison Sudradjat. 'People not only lost their families and their belongings but also those links that bind people together and allow them to function as a social group.'

AusAID is funding the construction of 66 community halls in the most devastated areas of Aceh Besar, as well as office accommodation in six sub-districts. The cost will be about \$3 million.

The halls are multi-purpose but in the short term they'll provide much needed meeting places for decision makers and villagers to consult. 'When the community halls are built, it will make it easier for the local governments to inform people about essential services that can help with the daunting task of rebuilding homes and lives. Not having a building of any sort to work from has made this pretty difficult so far,' says Allison. Some of the immediate issues are releasing identity cards, village planning proposals and providing building approvals.

AusAID has sent several engineers to Aceh to offer technical advice and help supervise construction. Many Acehnese have never worked as builders before so they're picking up important new skills. The training aspect