



The Borneo Case Discussion Guide

Directors: Dylan Williams & Erik Pauser
Year: 2016
Time: 90 min

You might know these directors from:
Infected (2012)
Men Who Swim (2010)
The Face of the Enemy (2009)

FILM SUMMARY

Nestled within Southeast Asia's Malay Archipelago and shared by the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, Indonesian Kalimantan, and the tiny nation of Brunei is the giant, but little known island of Borneo, home to one of the oldest rainforests in the world. Since 1981, Sarawak, the Malaysian part of Borneo, had been under the rule of Chief Minister Abdul Taib Mahmud, whose extravagant personal wealth and reported tight control over the logging industry led to much suspicion of corruption as deforestation began to ravage not only the old growth forests, but the indigenous people who called the forests their home. After decades of being the biggest exporter of tropic timber, Sarawak's rainforest which was the third largest virgin rainforest in the world was essentially wiped out.

With help from Mutang Urud, a former Borneo tribesman now living in exile in Canada; Clare Rewcastle Brown, a British investigative journalist; Peter John Jaban, a pirate DJ on the run in Borneo; and Lukas Straumann, a Swiss historian, activist, and writer, THE BORNEO CASE reveals the calamitous tale of how the rainforest is being transformed into a land stripped of its natural resources.

Lying within a network of bureaucratic secrecy, public denials of governmental malfeasance and a slew of negligent timber mafia organizations more than willing to exploit the land and its people, a story erupts filled with corruption, intimidation, exploitation, and finally, hope, as activists reveal the truth about Mahmud's profiteering and the methodized deforestation of Borneo.

FILM THEMES

After years of corrupt governmental officials profiteering from the deforestation of Borneo, activists risk everything to reveal the truth in hopes of saving the rainforests and the indigenous people that call this land their home.

GOVERNMENTAL CORRUPTION AIDED BY BIG BANKS

According to U.S. embassy cables leaked by Wikileaks back in 2011, Chief Minister “Taib and his relatives [were] widely thought to extract a percentage from most major commercial contracts—including those for logging—awarded in the state.” Since then, activists have continued to investigate, revealing Taib’s extensive personal wealth built with the help of corroborating logging companies and money sheltering major financial institutions. Even amidst public outcry, HSBC Bank continued to list Sarawak loggers among its clientele, in apparent violation of its own Forest Land and Forest Products Sector Policy.

THE EXPLOITATION AND DEVASTATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

In 2012, “The Economist” reported that “Sarawak has lost more than 90 percent of its ‘primary’ forests to logging and has the fastest rate of deforestation in Asia. Sarawak has only 0.5 percent of the world’s tropical forest but accounted for 25 percent of tropical-log exports in 2010. As timber stocks have become depleted, the loggers have moved into the palm-oil business, clearing peat-swamp forests to make way for plantations. The deforestation has been accompanied by abuses against indigenous groups, including harassment and illegal evictions.” Years later, the film proves that the situation isn’t looking much brighter. While the film focuses on Borneo, the highly lucrative trade in illegally harvested timber—established by Interpol to be worth between USD 51 and USD 152 billion annually—is also rampant in Papua New Guinea, Cameroon, the Congo, and the Amazon.

YOUR VOICE IS YOUR WEAPON

Investigative journalism via the Sarawak Report, the pirate radio station Radio Free Sarawak, and recurring engagement with mass media are just a few of the weapons taken up in service of the fight against the corruption and abuse that has plagued Borneo and its rainforests. Crime can not go unnoticed when facing an informed public unafraid of voicing the truth.

INDIGENOUS CULTURES ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION

Approximately 935,935 people from Kelabit, Penan, Iban, Kayan, and other indigenous communities (collectively referred to as Dayak) currently reside in Sarawak, each with their own unique cultural customs and beliefs. Since most of these groups have always been forest dwelling nomads, reliant on their lush environment for food and just about any other need, the destruction of the rainforests has forced them to abandon not only their cultural traditions, but their very way of life.

“Trees, how many of ‘em do we need to look at?”

Ronald Reagan

“Only after the last tree has been cut down. Only after the last river has been poisoned. Only after the last fish has been caught. Only then will you find that money cannot be eaten.”

a Cree Indian Prophecy

FILM FACTS:

- THE BORNEO CASE had its world premiere as the Opening Film at the Freedom Film Festival in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in August of 2016.
- Bruno Manser, a Swiss environmental activist, who stayed with the Penan tribe in Sarawak and organised several blockades against timber companies from 1984 to 1990. While visiting his Penan nomadic friends in 2000 he mysteriously went missing. His friendship with Mutang Urud and his disappearance inspired the eventual production of THE BORNEO CASE.
- In a report from 2012, “The Economist” alleges that Sarawak had lost more than 90 percent of its primary forests to logging and had the fastest rate of deforestation in Asia. Not only that, but Sarawak had only 0.5 percent of the world’s tropical forest but accounted for 25 percent of tropical-log exports in 2010.
- In the United States, Canada, Australia, and England, an estimated 40 to 50 percent of supermarket and drugstore items contain palm oil. Over the past 25 years, the global output has grown from 14.5 million to 61 million tons a year—making palm oil a \$40 billion industry—and the land covered by oil palm plantations grew from 15 million to 40 million acres. Malaysia and Indonesia produce 85 percent of the world’s supply, according to “Smithsonian Magazine.”
- In 1991, Al Gore, then a U.S. senator, condemned the logging activities in Sarawak, and in a speech at Kew Gardens, Prince Charles described the treatment of the Penan as part of a global “collective genocide.”
- In 2013, Radio Free Sarawak received the Free Media Pioneer Award from the International Press Institute for its on-going attempts to expose alleged government corruption in Malaysia.
- Radio Free Sarawak’s founder Clare Rewcastle Brown is the sister-in-law of former British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown.
- Peter John Jaban, Clare Rewcastle Brown’s on-air partner in Radio Free Sarawak, is better known by his on-air pseudonym, Papa Orang Utan.
- To celebrate Bruno Manser’s 60th birthday, a species of goblin spiders, discovered by a Dutch-Swiss research expedition in Sarawak’s Pulong Tau National Park, was named after Manser.
- According to reports, Abdul Taib Mahmud Taib and his 20-member family are collectively worth \$21 billion. Taib himself is worth \$15 billion, his sibling Onn Mahmud has an alleged net worth of \$1.5 billion and is the second richest man in Malaysia, while his other brother Tufail has \$600 million and sister Raziah is worth \$500 million.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Get informed about the current situation of deforestation in Borneo and around the globe from online resources like [The Borneo Project](#), [Sarawak Report](#), and [Global Forest Watch](#).
2. Donate to [Sarawak Report](#). Every dollar helps to continue impacting the political debates over corruption and deforestation in Malaysia.
3. Look for the [Forest Stewardship Council \(FSC\)](#) label when purchasing wood products and help protect forests. The Forest Stewardship Council’s mission is to promote environmentally sound, socially beneficial, and economically prosperous management of the world’s forests.
4. Become a member of environmental conservation groups like [Sierra Club](#), the [World Wildlife Fund](#), or the [National Audubon Society](#) to help ensure our rainforests, its animals, and the indigenous people that call them home all survive for generations to come.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.