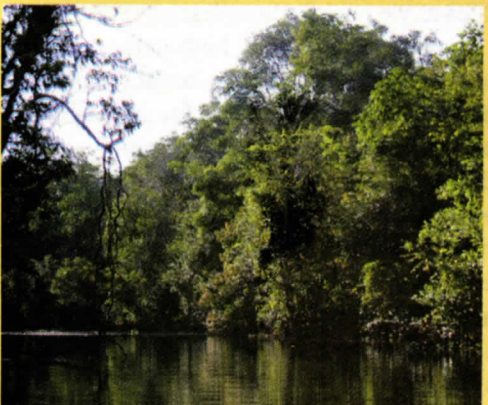




# Wild Times

## Riverside Reflections

*Text and Photo by Joe Foy*



I was sitting as still and as quiet as I could in the bow of the little river boat, doing my best not to scare away the brilliant blue kingfisher perched on a branch just above my head.

This past February I was with a half dozen people from various parts of the world on a guided nature tour, gliding through water that looked like chocolate milk. We hit the jungle-lined riverbank with a gentle thud. Happily the little bird stayed put, and I was able to get off several shots with the camera. With my eye glued to the viewfinder, our guide hissed in my ear a warning, then urgently pointed at a tangle of roots, about two metres from where I sat. I turned and stared intently at the muddy jumble on the riverbank and was startled to see the golden eyes of a python looking right back at me! This was my introduction to the amazing Kinabatangan River, located in the Malaysian state of Sabah, on the island of Borneo.

For anyone interested in seeing an abundance of wildlife species up close in a natural habitat, the Kinabatangan River is like a real life visit to Jurassic Park. It's a big, brown river that starts in the highcountry of north Borneo's interior and snakes its way, across a wide plain to dump into the Sulu Sea near the port of Sandakan. In some ways it reminds me of the Fraser River near my home in New Westminster, BC. But only after a short time on the Kinabatangan, it became clear I wasn't in New West any more. Its river banks are overhung with tall tropical trees, vines hanging down

into the soil laden water. From time to time crocodiles float up to the surface to have a peek and a grin, then disappear in a muddy swirl.

The Kinabatangan River is a kind of time capsule, with wildlife here that are long gone in other parts of southeast Asia. Wild Asian elephants and even rhinos still roam the forest, alongside species found only on Borneo, like the proboscis monkey. The area is also home to one of Earth's wildlife superstars – the old man of the forest, the orangutan.

The jungle here is thick. Seeing wildlife, even wildlife as big as an elephant would be a difficult slog – were it not for the Kinabatangan. Floating out on the river with the help of local guides, the jungle-clad river banks become an incredible showcase of nature's diversity.

The variety of life in Malaysia's wild forests is mind-bending. Research has discovered that new species of trees can be found every few kilometres, which makes this forest very different from my neck of the woods back in British Columbia.

It was however, a bittersweet visit. Seeing this kaleidoscope of life face-to-face was both amazing, and heartbreaking at the same time.

On the long bus ride to the Kinabatangan I was shocked to see the amount of lands covered in oil palm tree plantations. By the time I made it to the river bank, I had travelled for hours and hours through a landscape where the wild forest had been utterly eliminated to make way for vast corporate-owned oil palm tree plantations.



But it was my look at Google Earth that made me gasp. Palm oil plantations crowded the river at every turn, erasing the wild forest, and the wildlife that had lived there. In many sections of the Kinabatangan only a narrow remnant of the once vast wild forest remains, with the wildlife there hanging on by a thread. One of the reasons that I could see so much life from the boat I was in, was that this riverside forest is the last stand for many species in this area.

What is driving all this terrible destruction? Two things. Money and lack of indigenous land rights. Vast quantities of palm oil are exported to countries around the world, including Canada, to be used in consumer items from soap to junk food. Tribal land rights in Malaysia and Indonesia

are trampled on to make way for the expanding plantations.

What can the average Canadian do about this? It turns out there are lots of things. Do a bit of research and try to eliminate as best you can products that contain palm oil, which

Support indigenous land rights here at home – because I believe that every win here will have positive influence around the world

may be listed as vegetable oil. Support organizations such as Greenpeace and Rainforest Action Network and their anti-palm oil campaigns.

And most importantly, support indigenous land rights here at home – because I believe that every win here

will have positive influence around the world.

By supporting the Tsilhqot'in Nation and their fight against the New Prosperity Mine at Fish Lake, or by supporting the Treaty 8 First Nations in their fight against Site C – we not only defend justice and human rights – we give local wildlife a chance at survival – and we may just give species like the orangutan a fighting chance too.



Joe Foy is Campaign Director for the Wilderness Committee, Canada's largest citizen-funded membership-based wilderness preservation organization.

# Watershed Sentinel

News & views for a sustainable future since 1991

☒ **Yes! Sign me Up for news from the grassroots!**

FROM: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ PROV: \_\_\_\_\_

POSTAL CODE: \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

This is a Gift To: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

CITY: \_\_\_\_\_ PROV: \_\_\_\_\_

POSTAL CODE: \_\_\_\_\_ PHONE: \_\_\_\_\_

What to say on your gift card announcement: \_\_\_\_\_

Save  
30%

☐ Electronic subscription 1 year (5 issues) \$15, 2 years \$30

☐ 1 year (5 issues) Canada \$25 (USA \$35) ☐ 2 years Canada \$40 (USA \$60)

☐ Bundle\*\* for a year: 5/\$40\_\_\_ 10/\$70\_\_\_ 15/\$100\_\_\_ 20/\$125\_\_\_ 25/\$150\_\_\_ 50/\$300\_\_\_

☐ Donation ☐\$20 ☐\$50 ☐\$100 ☐\$200 Monthly \$\_\_\_\_\_ a month\*\* (See Sustainers Page for details)

**\*\* Bundle subscribers and monthly donors receive a free subscription**

☐VISA ☐Mastercard Number \_\_\_\_\_ Expiry: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Total Enclosed \_\_\_\_\_ Payable to Watershed Sentinel. Thank you very much!