

The History of Forest Reservation in Sabah

Introduction

As climate change and the problems associated with it loom over us, the importance of maintaining forest cover, or even increasing forest cover, has become an important national agenda for many countries. Whether it is for sequestering carbon or conserving biodiversity, the multiple benefits of maintaining forest cover is now seen as critical for the well-being of humankind. Although much of Sabah's forests have been cleared for settlements, agriculture, as well as infrastructure, a large part of Sabah still remains under some form of forest cover.

Sabah's native forests are mainly found within areas designated by law as Forest Reserve, State Park, or Wildlife Sanctuary. Together these 3 classes of forest use account for 53 % (4.4million *ha*) of Sabah's landmass, and are sometimes referred to as The Permanent Forest Estate. Little native forests are left outside the boundaries of the PFE.

The principal agencies involved in forest resource administration and management are The Forestry Department, The Wildlife Department, and The Sabah State Parks. All forest reserve lands are govern by the Forest Enactment and come under the administration of the Forestry Department

Early days of forest reservation

The FD was formed in 1914 under the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company. With the introduction of Ordinance No. 11, 'Timber and Jungle Produce', two years later, the concept of 'forest reserve' was defined.

The first forest reserve (FR) in Sabah (then British North Borneo) was the Tuaran Timber Reserve which was gazetted on 6/4/1920, and it was regarded as a Communal Reserve. However, technically, the first 'forest reserve' was Pulau Gaya FR (off Kota Kinabalu), gazetted on 1/3/1923. Today, it is part of the Tunku Abdul Rahman State Park.

In the early 20th century, forest surveys were very time-consuming due to the lack of overland routes. Thus, only forest areas accessible by rivers or dirt roads from the main towns were gazetted. Nevertheless, forest reservation continued. The Gomantong FR in the Lower Kinabatangan Floodplain was gazetted on 1/10/1925. Today, it is the oldest existing FR.

By 1930, there were about 30,066.8 ha of FRs, or about 0.37% of the total area of Sabah.

The 10 % Target

In 1931, the FD, headed by H.G. Keith, endeavoured to have at least 10% of the total area of the State to be under FRs. Later in 1935, FRs were internally (i.e. within the FD) classified into 4 classes based on their functions. Thus, the FRs were classified into Class 1 (Protection), Class 2 (Production), Class 3 (Domestic) and Class 4 (Amenity).

The main reasons for gazetting forest reserves then were mainly for:

- protection from timber exploitation,
- preservation of natural forest types,
- protection against soil erosion, and
- water catchments.



Sapagaya Forest Reserve, Lahad Datu, in 1952. Today, it is a forest reserve made up of 3 large blocks of land. Photo by GS Brown.

Post-World War II Forest Management

North Borneo's major towns and infrastructure suffered a heavy toll from the War. Any reconstruction effort would have been a costly affair for the North Borneo Chartered Company. Therefore, in 1946, following the 2nd World War, North Borneo became a British Crown Colony, under the administration of the British Government. In July that same year, H.G. Keith was reappointed Conservator of Forests and Director of Agriculture.

It was at this time that H.G. Keith took steps to improve the Forestry Department's management of forest resources, which he observed to be one of 'exploitation' and not of 'sustained yield'. Thus, in 1948, the 'sustained yield' Forest Policy was officially adopted by the Government. The policy also reaffirmed the FD's aim (first documented in 1931) to constitute at least 10% of the total land area of Sabah under FRs. However, early problems with overlapping functions of FRs were discovered, evident from the following statement (grammatically edited) taken from the 1948 FD Annual Report:

'In certain cases, there are overlaps, for example an area may be both Class 1 and Class 2. In such a case, it is classed according to the primary reason for its reservation, but this, in the case of a PROTECTION FOREST, does not mean that it cannot be exploited if it also produces timber or forest produce that can be worked without endangering the primary reason for its reservation.'

Forest Concession Areas Gazetted As FRs

In 1952, the Government recommended that concession areas worked on a sustained yield basis also be gazetted as FRs. The step was a digression from one of the main purposes of FR gazettement, i.e. protection from timber exploitation.

Thus, beginning in 1956, licensed areas or concessions were also gazetted as FRs although internally classified as Class 2 Production FRs. Kalabakan & Ulu Kalumpang FRs in the East Coast were amongst the first constituted as such due to this change in policy. In that year, mangroves were also included in the classification for the first time.

These two changes resulted in about 5.2 % of the Sabah's total land area being classified as FRs, a significant increase since pre-WWII times. In 1958, FR areas breached the 10% mark at 10.9%. But to put this in perspective, about 80 % of Sabah was still forested then.

Accelerated timber harvesting

From the 1950s' to the late 1970s', the rate of timber harvesting progressed almost exponentially. This was mainly due to two key points, the first was the introduction of mechanised timber harvesting, like the use of tractors (1952) and chainsaws (1961). Secondly, the completion of a state-wide forest inventory map in 1972 clearly showed—for the first time—the availability of timber resources throughout the state.

Inadvertently, with the use of powerful machines and a 'treasure' map, timber harvesting accelerated at an unprecedented rate. Despite the 1974-75 worldwide oil crises, the timber industry in Sabah thrived and collected about MYR 1.1 billion in forest revenue by 1979 (see Fig. 1).



North Borneo Timber Ltd. introduced Caterpillar tractors with Hyster arches in 1952 at Kretam. Photo by GS Brown.

Unfortunately, the timber boom of the 1970s also resulted in a rapid pace of de-reservation of portions of the gazetted, preliminary notified and proposed forest reserves. Thus, the area of FRs dipped briefly from 39.9% of Sabah's land area in 1972 to 38.0% in 1978.

The rampant reclassification and de-reservation exercises were so alarming that the Sabah Government proposed to put a halt to these practice.

New Hope In 1984

To ensure the long-term sustainability of forest resources in Sabah, it was clear that a new set of FRs was needed. Similarly, amendments to certain clauses of the Forest Enactment were needed to ensure that there would be no further unnecessary de-reservation of constituted forest reserves. This new set of FRs came in the form of improving upon H.G. Keith's original FR classification.

Thus, on 14/3/1984, the Sabah State Government, led by Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh, regazetted all forest reserves to include forest reserve classes into the names of constituted reserves. This meant that even the classes of forest reserves were constituted (for e.g. 'Silabukan Forest Reserve' became 'Silabukan Forest Reserve, Class 1 Protection Forest').

Three classes of FRs were added to the classification, namely Class 5 Mangrove Forest, Class 6 Virgin Jungle Reserve and Class 7 Wildlife Reserve.

With this bold move, about 45.4% of Sabah's land area came under forest reserves, more than 4 times the percentage envisioned by H.G. Keith in 1931!

This legislative change meant that forest reserves could not be reclassified within the FD anymore. Any changes to the classification of forest reserves after 1984, especially changes to Class 2 Commercial Forest Reserves, had to be approved by the State Legislative Assembly and the Governor of Sabah. This process can be is very time-consuming and even controversial.

Problems Ahead

With all the good intentions for such an undertaking, the FD produced the regazettement maps of 1984 without having sufficient time for conducting ground verifications. While in general the outcome was very beneficial to forest conservation, it led to some disputes of land ownership.

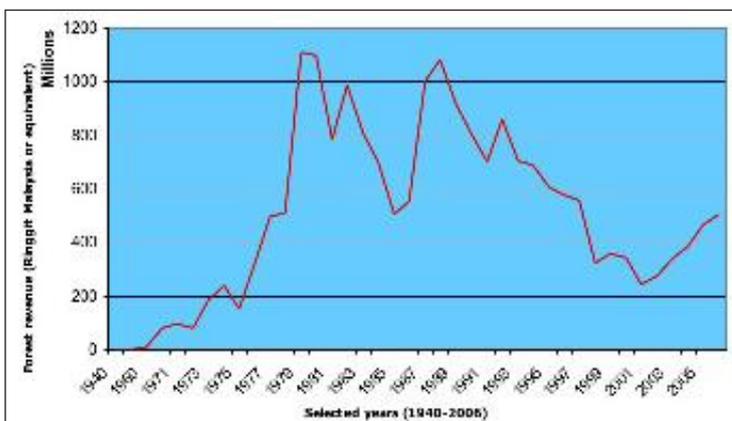


Fig. 1: Forest revenue for selected years between 1940 and 2006

Problems In Forest Classification

The integrity of the FD internal classification scheme was tested during the 1970s when faced with overlapping functions of forest reserves. For example, in 1975 FRs were noted as "classified as 1 and 4", "classified as 1 and 3", "classified as 2 and 4", "classified as 1 and 4", etc. Clearly, these overlaps needed to be resolved.

Similarly, as the FR classification was an internal matter, the FRs were easily reclassified internally. For example, Class 1 Protection FRs were reclassified to Class 2 Production FRs whenever there was a 'need.' Reclassifications were made many times in the 1970s to meet increased timber production.

After 1984, some villages and their associated farms, and orchards and titled lands were found to be located within FRs. Technically, the villagers and settlers were inadvertently trespassing on the land of their forefathers. While some claims may have been genuine, others have used the regazettement slip-up as leverage to claim recently-developed land as ancestral land. Some of these problems persist until today.

The Path Towards Sustainable Forest Management

It was clear that the 1984 changes to the Forest Enactment had been ineffective in protecting forest resources. Primary lowland and highland dipterocarp forest cover dwindled from 2.8 million ha to 0.3 million ha between 1975 and 1995, in the Class II forest reserves. During the same period, the area of disturbed forests jumped from 1.4 million ha to 2.5 million ha. By far the most drastic change was in the primary forests of Class 2 Production FRs which dropped from 98 % forest cover in 1970 to just 15 % in 1996.

In the 1990s, the FD actively promoted its concept of sustainable forest management within the industry and the government. In 1997, Sabah's forestry policy received a major overhaul to include provisions for sustainable forest management, controlled harvesting, reforestation, multiple-use forests and community development. Short-term timber harvesting licences were phased out to make way for Sustainable Forest Management Licence Agreements, which are for 100 years and cover areas about 100,000 ha each. Conditions for the licences are based on a model forest project in Deramakot FR, which is managed by the FD and was certified as well managed by the Forest Stewardship Council in 1997.

Meanwhile, the FD's efforts in forest reservation continued with the gazettement of prime forest lands. Of significant importance were the gazettement of Danum

Valley FR (1995) and Maliau Basin FR (1997) as Class 1 Protection FRs. These FRs represent some of the best examples of the mixed dipterocarp and kerangas forest types in Sabah respectively.

Today, forest reservation remains an important task of the FD. In 2006 alone, six new FRs (about 3,570 ha in total) were proposed.

Current status of forest reservation

Today, forest reserves covers almost half (48.8 %) of Sabah's total land area (see Fig. 2). Including the parks under Sabah Parks, this figure would increase to 52.6%. If all forested areas are taken into account, about 60 % of Sabah is still under some form of forest cover. That, in itself, is quite an achievement and it shows that the Sabah Forestry Department and the State Government are resolute about the sustainability and quality of our forest resources.

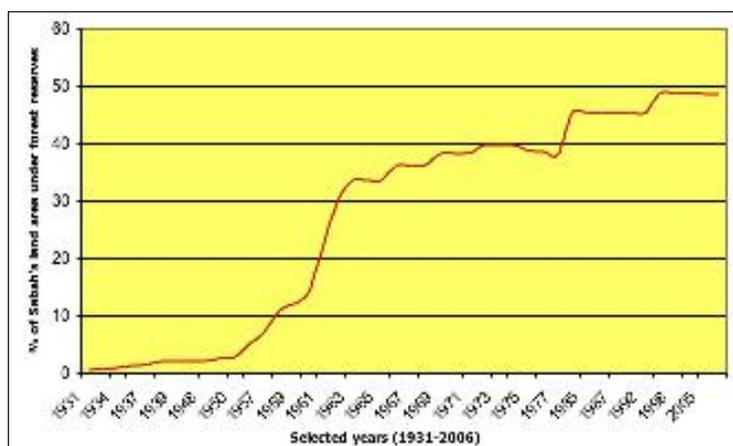


Fig. 2: Percentage of Sabah's land area under forest reserves for selected years between 1931 and 2006

You will never do anything in this world without courage. It is the greatest quality of the mind next to honor.

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