

Is colonial history repeating itself with Sabah forest carbon deal? (commentary)

Cynthia Clare Ong Gaik Suan

5 hours ago



primary forest in Danum Valley Conservation Area, Sabah, by John C. Cannon/Mongabay

- *To the surprise of Indigenous and local communities, a huge forest carbon conservation agreement was recently signed in the Malaysian state of Sabah on the island of Borneo.*
- *Granting rights to foreign entities on more than two million hectares of the state's tropical forests for the next 100-200 years, civil society groups have called for more transparency.*
- *"Is history repeating itself? Are we not yet free or healed from our colonial and wartime histories?" wonders a Sabahan civil society leader who authored this opinion piece calling for more information, more time, and a say.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily of Mongabay.*

"Bornean communities locked into 2-million-hectare carbon deal they don't know about" – 9 Nov 2021, Mongabay

This was the headline Sabah woke up to on the morning of November 10th. Before the [Mongabay story](#) broke, I heard from Australian friends and allies as early as July that something was afoot. Forests, carbon, climate and communities are core to our collaborative work between civil society and government. I asked colleagues in government if they had any information but did not hear a clear response.

Over the weeks, I heard increasingly ominous whisperings. On 28 October, I received an email from international partners who had seen a Sabah deal – claimed to be signed in August – mentioned by external corporate entities in presentation materials. They were curious if I knew anything about it.

The materials were presented by Tierra Australia, Hoch Standard and Global Natural Capital (GNC) – seemingly Australian, Singaporean and Malaysian entities. Here are two slides from the 43 pages I received:



Screenshot of slide 11 of 14 slides presented by the three companies.

A month later, I'm still struggling to understand why and how this happened – and why we had to learn about it from outside Sabah.

Much has been [revealed](#) since then. We've now read numerous press articles, social media posts and reposts. We've seen online videos of the home offices of our new partners and footage of Hoch Standard's Corporate Advisor Stan Golokin representing Sabah at COP26 in Glasgow, explaining carbon. We've read fact sheets and due diligence reports and realized that we don't know who Sabah has signed this deal with. And some of us attended a briefing where Datuk Dr. Jeffrey Kitingan and team '[mansplained](#)' the deal to the public and civil society, after the deal was made.

But we have not heard the truth.



Screenshot of slide 21 of 21 slides presented by Tierra Australia & GNC, naming Hoch Standard as partner.

I identify as a community member of Sabah. I care about what happens to this *tanahair* (homeland) we belong to, over the next 100 years and then 100 years beyond that and onwards. I worry about whether our future communities can have food and water, and can be safe, self-determined, and sovereign. I aspire to be a good ancestor.

I, like many people in Sabah, yearn for true leadership that I can trust. I have zero tolerance for vague, unintelligible platitudes and half-truths disguised as leadership. It is an insult to our intelligence.

When will we finally stop with messiah/savior politics? With leaders who only have one tune in their repertoire – divide and rule with promises of wealth – and whose approach to fighting Federal Patriarchy, nationalism and *ketuanan* (patronage) involves using the exact same rhetoric? I urge us to get out of this delusional and dysfunctional trance before we lose everything and ourselves with it.

With the British North Borneo Chartered Company/Hoch Standard/Tierra Australia, is history repeating itself? Are we not yet free or healed from our colonial and wartime histories? Are we still riddled with illusions of inferiority and such self-doubt that we will step away from responsibility and sovereignty again? And hand our power, our rights, to those who have no idea who we are and what *tanahair* means?



Primary forest in Danum Valley Conservation Area, Sabah. Image by John C. Cannon for Mongabay.

Has patronage politics disempowered us and debilitated our agency? How can we stand back while discourse and democracy are replaced by silence and blind loyalty to the “lord” (*Tuan, Datuk, Tan Sri, Bos, etc.*)?

The more our doors are closed, the less transparent our processes become, and the wider the division between us. The more divided we are, the more future-altering decisions are made for the majority by a disconnected few. The more this is normalized, the smaller and less human we become, and more corruption breeds.

Two million hectares is more than a quarter of Sabah, two million hectares of forests is more than half our forests, 100 years is about four generations, 200 years is double that.

This is big. So big and so long that Sabahans deserve and need information and time – and a say. We do not want to be presented a gift of a done deal with bags of money (to perpetuate patronage politics); prior and open fact-sharing, communication and consultation is what we want and in fact demand from our leaders.



Sun bears (*Helarctos malayanus*) are among the many charismatic wildlife species found in Sabah. Image by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

Many of us in the social and environmental justice and conservation fields have spent decades working on a range of issues with growing intersectionality. We have nurtured real and trusting relationships both on the ground in Sabah and out in the world. We sought and continue to seek political and societal will and ambition for an equitable, climate-resilient future for Sabah.

We collectively, and in collaboration with Sabah's civil service, have the confidence, capacities, expertise and partnerships necessary to build a home-grown, bottom-up process: a Sabah process. We do not require the unknown services of a Tierra Australia or the benevolence of a Hoch Standard to tell us who we are, what we have and how we need to manage it.

Is it possible to salvage this moment for Sabah?

Clean up, repent, learn. Pick ourselves up and build a self-governing, sovereign carbon future for Sabah.

I am speaking up in the absence of truth.

Cynthia Ong is founder and Chief Executive Facilitator of [Land Empowerment Animals People \(LEAP\)](#) in Sabah.

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