MANAGING TASEK BERA: DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE AND NATIONAL PARKS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

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INTRODUCTION

Conservation and development are two prominent words in the world today. The former has years of evolvement from fortress conservation to neoliberal conservation (Brown, 2002) while the latter promotes the idea of sustainability in a global world. Efforts to integrate both have not always been successful.

The link between conservation and development is notable enough in Protected Areas (PAs). In these natural areas, interactions occur among several factors: local communities, park managers, NGOs, politicians and private ecotourism operators. In fact, conservation of biodiversity is an interdisciplinary field which involves biologists, foresters, anthropologists, zoologists, botanists, economists and political scientists.

What is a PA? In 1992 Convention on the Biological Diversity (CBD) defines a PA as, “A geographically defined area which is designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives”. According to Dudley & Stolton (2008), it was later defined as “Clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.”

This paper will look at the experience of Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) in managing Tasek Bera. Semelais form the backbone of local communities at Tasek Bera. In Malaysia, bulks of the PAs were established during its colonial periods. Although it was gazetted as a PA only in 2007, Tasek Bera has had a long history of interactions between authorities and local communities. However for better understanding we need to look at the history of PAs formation in Peninsular Malaysia. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study I will limit this to the PAs under the DWNP. Given the encompassing definition of PA, it is imperative that local community participation in the management of PAs be promoted and recognised.

PAs in Peninsular Malaysia

The first PA in Peninsular Malaysia, Chior Wildlife Reserve was established in 1903 during the colonial period under the British Government (Elagupillay, 2004). Currently, there are more than 700,000 hectares of PAs in Peninsular Malaysia governed by a set of laws. These PAs comprise of national parks, wildlife reserves and wetlands. Some of the main PAs are Taman Negara Pahang, Taman Negara Kelantan, Taman Negara Terengganu, Krau Wildlife Reserve, Sungkai Wildlife Reserve, Taman Negara Pulau Pinang, Tasek Bera Ramsar Site and Sg. Dusun Wildlife Reserve. Taman Negara National Park is an interstate PA which boasts the largest size of a PA in Malaysia. Figure 1 shows the main PAs in Peninsular Malaysia.
Tasek Bera

Tasek Bera is the largest freshwater lake in Malaysia which situated in the southwestern part of Pahang Darul Makmur. The main habitats are open water, reed/sedge swamps and lowland forests. The uniqueness of it stems from the fact that the lake drains northwards through Sungai Bera, which then goes into the longest river in Peninsular Malaysia, Sungai Pahang. Following the ratification into Ramsar Convention, Tasek Bera was designated as the country’s first wetland of international importance, or Ramsar Site in 1994. Subsequently, a Management Plan (MP) was established. In addition, Tasek Bera was gazetted as Permanent Forest Reserve on 30 August 2007 under the National Forestry Act 1984. The PA of Tasek Bera is an area of 31,255 hectares and 6,800 hectares of these are wetlands. Further, 77,380 hectares was designated as buffer zone (Figure 2).
Tasek Bera is an area of high biodiversity and very significant in its cultural and ecological importance. The features and characteristics of Tasek Bera are outlined in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features/Characteristics</th>
<th>Remark</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hydrological functions</td>
<td>purification of water</td>
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<td>flood control and flow regulation</td>
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<td>organic matter stored in the form of peat</td>
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<td>2. Carbon sink</td>
<td>alteration of the ecosystem will result in the release of carbon dioxide, thus increasing the temperature</td>
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<td>3. Importance for biological diversity</td>
<td>374 plant species</td>
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<td></td>
<td>94 fish species</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>230 bird species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>68 mammal species</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Occurrence of endangered species
   - Asian Elephant
   - Malayan Tiger
   - Tapir
   - Asian Arowana

5. Occurrence of endemic species
   Cryptocoryne purpurea (an aquatic plant)

6. Importance to Semelai community
   - Livelihood
   - Culture

7. Potential for recreation and tourism
   High level of biodiversity offers a range of activities for ecotourism

8. Potential for nature education
   Nature-based surrounding suitable for awareness programmes

Semelai Community

The Semelais have been present at Tasek Bera for at least 600 years (Kangayatkarasu, 2003), and during the insurgency period, they were resettled at Post Iskandar. The Semelais consider Tasek Bera as their sacred home (Elagupillay et al., 2008) and are still dependent on it for their livelihood and cultural purposes despite the shift towards growing crop plantations due to exposure to mainstream conditions (Kangayatkarasu, 2003). There are reportedly more than 3,500 of the Semelai population at Tasek Bera (Elagupillay et al., 2008). Although they are still swidden practitioners, the Semelais conducted several ecotourism activities to increase their socio-economic status. The Semelai Association for Boating and Tourism (SABOT) was established with assistance from Wetlands International Asia Pacific (WIAP). The continuity and longevity of the project are not really known and ascertained.

Management Unit (MU)

As in many MPs, zones are established for different activities (Figure 3). However, proper zonation on the ground is often absent and as a result, some anthropogenic activities occur in other areas. In summary, the goal of a Ramsar Site is to promote the wise use of the wetland site with cooperation from different stakeholders. Moreover, the biodiversity values must be at least maintained ecologically, and the Ramsar Site can be used to promote training and education (WIAP, 1999). In 2001, a Management Unit (MU) comprising different government agencies was established to reach these goals. The DWNP is the anchor department in this multi-agency set up, and some other personnel are roped in from Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia, Department of Environment, Department of Fisheries and Department of Orang Asli Affairs Malaysia. As a result of this management, several legislations have been enforced in Tasek Bera.
Management at Tasek Bera


“The ongoing concern is illegal hunting where poachers are involved in wildlife catch and even smuggling. There are few cases where pangolins were caught and smuggling attempted.”

Besides law enforcement, hydrological monitoring, boundary checking, fish conservation programmes and biodiversity education are also have been carried out.
Local Community Participation

There are two main types of local community participation: active and passive participation. The former must be adapted to foster healthy management conditions in PAs. Co-management is a prevalent concept in natural resource management where local communities are omnipresent. Co-management is defined by the Local Government New Zealand (2007) as “decision-making processes where more than one party is involved in the process.” It also mentions that perseverance of negotiations as opposed to adversarial approaches as one of the basics of this concept. At Tasek Bera, the local communities are involved in consultations, co-operation and communications, and also become part of a committee. The Semelais are main stakeholders hence their views and opinions are important in the management of Tasek Bera.

The MU and Semelais have participated in communal work programmes, and the MU has identified some of additional activities such as ecotourism and aquaculture training programmes for the Semelais to improve their livelihood.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

PAs are significant to local communities; it creates close relationships with the natural surroundings. Some of biodiversity found in PAs are sources of food and cultural importance for these communities. After the designation of Ramsar site, the Semelais faces so many do’s and don’ts, and it is also notable that not all of them participate in ecotourism or active consultations with the MU. This might “marginalize certain sections” of the community (Brown, 2002), and this will, in turn, cause conflicts between MU and the Semelais, and it is also known as “An expression of opposition” (Brockington, 2004). Active participation of the Semelais can be remedial to this, but attention must also be given to political and social dimensions among the communities.

Management of PAs must not be one dimensional and too rigid. Conservation of biodiversity and PA management can be as strict and rigid as the fortress conservation. We can also employ a combination of different approaches, co-management and integrated management. Semelais’ participation is imperative as these locals are major stakeholders at Tasek Bera. The benefits of PAs must reach local communities, and conservation of biodiversity must not preclude these communities. For these purposes, it would be wise if we accept that local communities are not homogeneous, and even in the same community such as the Semelais, ‘small groups’ exist. Active participation can contribute to effective stakeholder engagement and biodiversity conservation. Moreover, conservation of biodiversity is interdisciplinary and the learning experience can bring positive outcomes.
REFERENCES


