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First on Land, Last in Plan: The Orang Asli as Key Players in Forest Rehabilitation, Management and Conservation Practises

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There are 869 Orang Asli communities within Peninsular Malaysia, with the state of Pahang accommodating the highest number of Orang Asli. Despite formal acknowledgement of the government's responsibility to the Orang Asli (Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954), the Orang Asli have always been considered relatively unimportant players within the Malaysian political sphere, often marginalised and exploited for their ancestral land. Success stories in Asia and a variety of literature have revealed that community based forestry and management practises have been a proven means to rehabilitate and conserve forests sustainably. Through interviews conducted with Orang Asli in the Pekan Forest Reserve, (neighbouring Bukit Lee/au Estate), this paper uses this case study coupled with the rehabilitation works with the same Orang Asli community conducted by the Global Environment Centre (GEC) to reveal the true impacts community based forestry can have. Only when the Orang Asli are recognised as key players, can the combined efforts from both the state authority and the Orang Asli produce an inclusive and effective framework towards better rehabilitation, management and conservation practises.

The review shows that at the same time an interview with a few residents of the Orang Asli settlement adjoining a plantation indicates that the residents benefit from the plantation: some having employment in the plantation and the community benefits from the plantations' infrastructure for access. The interview also reveals that the peat/lands were a result of carelessness by fishermen who use fires on poles to attract fish during fishing at night.

Keywords: *Orang Asli, aborigines, peat/land, peat fire, peat rehabilitation.*

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