



# Human-Nature

## Delegation Report



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# Foreword

*“Culture Shapes climate change and in turn climate change transforms culture”*

- Karima Bennoune, UN Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, 2020 Report



**Florence Lambert**  
Head of Arts & Creative  
Industries  
British Council Malaysia

Each person on this planet impacts their environment. But not all humans hold the same relationship with their environment. Understanding the different interactions, approaches and practices, our cultural differences, and similarities, is key to be able to reimagine new narratives and develop adaptation solutions. Much has been written about climate change and climate adaptation strategies. Most answers are sought through science, research, and technology. Cultural rights and heritage, and the communities they involve, are on the front line of climate change. While communities and cultural heritage are impacted by climate change, they can also be a part of the adaptation strategies. Culture and heritage drive and enable sustainable development.

The role of cultural institutions and mediators between governments and local communities is even more important today. Adopting a rights-based approach for engagement of communities must be a priority, as only this approach will allow for shaping an inclusive narrative involving the communities and facing issues and challenges together. Considering sustainable and ethical practices in the work of cultural organisations, and connecting with Indigenous and rural communities, can lead to considering our relationship with the environment and the climate crisis.

The British Council increasingly promotes more sustainable practice across creative sectors with programmes such as “Culture Responds to Global Challenges”, [training programme for major arts festivals](#) in the Americas. Since 2021, we have commissioned over [40 innovative, interdisciplinary collaborations](#) that harness art, science and technologies to increase public engagement in the climate emergency and biodiversity loss. So far, over 4m people have been reached, involving more than 100 partners connected between UK and 80 countries.

**Human-Nature is a 3-year programme by British Council Malaysia, that enables UK and Malaysian artists, organisations, scientists, and academics, to research and collaborate, to better understand the Human relationship with Nature, and with each other. Human-Nature is a collaborative knowledge exchange programme aimed at creating a more inclusive and sustainable future, and defining the role arts can play in addressing climate change.** Across the three-year programme, Human-Nature will support the development of collaborative creative responses for climate adaptation, foster partnerships between communities, arts practitioners, scientists, and academia to embed arts and creative responses into organisations’ policy, elevate local Malaysian voices to share insights, knowledge and best practices around sustainable consumption and explore the intersections of arts, creativity, and climate adaptation.

In 2023, the British Council Malaysia started with commissioning a Community Engagement Guide that includes suggested recommendations on approaches towards working with communities within Malaysia, with a special focus on Indigenous and/or marginalised communities. This document aims to provide advice and assistance in developing ethical and co-collaborative approaches when working with local communities. It is designed to be a tool to assist but is not a one-size fits all approach.

We are also undertaking research to generate and share insights, knowledge, and best practices: generating thought-leadership content on Climate response and on equitable participation and conversation for local communities. Focusing on understanding how Malaysia's local community knowledge can offer alternative solutions to climate adaptation. The research will help to identify creative collaborations, long-term partnerships, and foster dialogues between Malaysian and UK arts sectors to address climate change.

**In March 2024, we organised a delegation for seven UK arts organisations leaders and representatives working at the intersection of arts and climate change to participate in a research visit in three states (Kuala Lumpur, Sabah and Sarawak). The aim of the visit was to create connections with Malaysian arts and climate activists and begin an interdisciplinary exchange between the UK and Malaysia.**

Over ten intense days, the cohort met with 250 artists, climate activists, researchers, academics, Civil Society Organisations, and community leaders. The exchanges left deep impressions with the 7 UK delegates who wanted to respond to the exchange with seven essays which are part of this document

and illustrate the depth of the conversations and dialogues they were able to engage in. The topics of coloniality, identity, extractive economies, displacements, and trauma. These are some of the hard yet most important topics we hope Human-Nature will be able to address through our upcoming pilot fellowship programme. The delegation was an amazing opportunity for the seven UK delegates to hear from the communities themselves their struggles and hopes.

The following essays are the delegates' responses to this experience. We hope that Human-Nature will provide a safe space for dialogue, knowledge exchange and inspire artists, creatives, climate organisations and policy makers to work together to create new narratives.

The next phase of the Human-Nature programme is an [Artist Fellowship: Time of the Rivers](#). In collaboration with Borneo Bengkel and Radical Ecology, this 6-month fellowship will offer 2 UK and 2 Malaysian artists an opportunity to explore the role of the arts and creative approaches to highlight climate adaptation, including online mentoring, immersive field visits in Borneo and the UK, and an online showcase of research and new works.

**We invite you to join us on our Human-Nature discovery journey.**





# Human-Nature Delegation – Journey Overview

Across ten days, and with the support of local partners, the 7 UK delegates met with over 250 Malaysian artists, NGOs, academics, conservationists, and communities in Peninsular and East Malaysia, who are using arts and creative practices to raise awareness about local cultural rights and the pressing climate challenges these communities face.



## Days 1-3: Peninsular Malaysia

The delegation began their journey in Kuala Lumpur, Peninsular Malaysia with a focus on collaboration and knowledge exchange. Hosted by spaces like [Rimbun Dahan](#), [Think City](#), and an event at Temu House, the first days offered open and honest conversations among artists, academics and artists, to collectively imagine what truly meaningful and inclusive partnerships could like, particularly for marginalised communities in Malaysia and the UK. The group also engaged directly with the Temuan community, meeting Indigenous artist Shaq Koyok to better understand the land rights and community challenges they have faced, as well the initiatives of organisations like the Global Environmental Centre, who work with communities to promote Indigenous participation in forest conversation.

## Days 4-7: Kuching, Sarawak

The delegation immersed themselves in the city's vibrant art scene, engaging with key figures at [Think&Tink](#) and [HAUS KCH](#), who are working to revitalise and support Kuching's art and culture communities. They also met with [The Tuyang Initiative](#) and [SAVE Rivers](#), grassroots organisations dedicated to empowering Indigenous communities to protect their ancestral lands and watersheds. Understanding Borneo's history and cultural diversity, visits to the Borneo Cultures Museum and [Tun Jugah Foundation](#), [www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature](http://www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature)

revealed the deep history and culture of the region, particularly through efforts to preserve traditional art forms such as Iban weaving and textiles. A trek to the remote Bidayuh villages of Kampung Nyegol and Kampung Sting, accessible by boat and jungle path, also offered understanding and dialogue with a community who have fought to preserve its land rights amid changing landscapes.



## Days 7-10: Kota Kinabalu, Sabah

During the final days of the delegation, in Sabah they explored the intricate balance between community, culture and environmental conversation. After receiving a tradition blessing in Penampang and welcomed by [PACOS Trust](#), they explored the meaning of indigeneity in a rapidly modernising world. They learned about the Kadazandusun cosmology and the intricate balance between land and livelihood through Forever Sabah's [Payment-for-Ecosystems Project](#) and [Projek Padi](#), which aims to revive traditional rice farming. The group also engaged in climate change discussions with conservationists at Tanjung Aru Marine Ecosystems Centre and the Wetland Ramsar Site, followed by meetings with local artists at Kota-K Gallery, and with [Pangrok Sulap](#), exploring the complex intersections of identity, statelessness, shared histories, and climate adaptation, told through art. See Forever Sabah's [report](#) for further details of the locations and stakeholders featured in the Sabah itinerary.

# Human-Nature Delegation - Delivery Partners

To deliver the Human-Nature Programme, British Council Malaysia worked with three local community organisations to design the delegation itinerary and to enable partnerships between community leaders/members, Malaysian arts practitioners, scientists and academia and the UK arts sectors. See below their aspirations and approaches to working on Human-Nature.

## Borneo Bengkel

**Borneo Bengkel** is a pan-Borneo platform that seeks to highlight the island's creative communities. Through the lens of arts and culture, Borneo Bengkel engages creatives of all disciplines as well as researchers and community workers, providing opportunities for organic connections and sustainable partnerships. 'Bengkel' means 'workshop' in the Malay language, and it reflects Borneo Bengkel's focus on knowledge exchange, mutual understanding, and collaboration.



**Forever Sabah's** mission is to support Sabah's transition to a diversified, equitable circular economy by catalysing positive institutional change through a ground-up, project-based approach; engaging the indigenous imperative and building capacity to sustainably manage Sabah's natural resources; and enhancing social and ecological resilience in the face of changing climate and land use. Their programmes cover a spectrum of initiatives that extend from ridge to reef in Sabah, and include numerous projects that directly involve local communities.

### Human-Nature collaboration: Aspirations & Approaches

- A collaborative learning (and re-learning) process transcending various divides: UK-Malaysia, urban-rural, environment-arts, and so on. Finding commonalities, friendship as we address challenges and differences. Resulting in a more nuanced, holistic understanding and appreciation of Mother Nature, as well as how we navigate climate change and adaptation in our respective contexts.
- In designing the Sarawak portion of the Delegation itinerary, we selected individuals/organisations who have the capability to honour the vision of Human-Nature. On a more micro level, these are individuals/organisations who have a degree of interest/experience of discourses around environment, and who are open to exploring creative responses towards climate adaptation in partnership with other individuals/organisations

### Human-Nature collaboration: Aspirations & Approaches

- To sow and nurture seeds of new relationships, stepping together into the cracks and discomfort of coloniality, and exploring what repairing ruptures and cultivating community could look like. Growing compassion, interbeing across cultures and shared histories, and co-creating a transformed narrative which interweaves the past, present and future. To explore how culture and arts can be centred as part of the shift for the linear extractive economy to the diversified, equitable and more circular economy.

*catama*

Based in Sarawak, Catama is an award-winning social enterprise working with rural and urban communities and creative practitioners to document, innovate and elevate traditional craft and cultural practices, and explore contemporary approaches to Borneo's unique creative heritage. Through their work they develop and deliver toolkits, products and systems for research, engagement, and capacity building, and create products, platforms and opportunities for inter-generational knowledge transfer. A core approach is co-creation and collaboration to ensure the work produced is meaningful, impactful, and responsive.

### Human-Nature collaboration: Aspirations & Approaches

- Opportunities to develop and facilitate co-collaborative and generous learning and sharing experiences. New international relationships alongside a strengthening of networks within Malaysia, in particular between Sarawak and Sabah.
- In designing the programme itinerary, we consulted the British Council's art team alongside conversation, sharings, and guidance from Forever Sabah and Borneo Bengkel to identify individuals and organisations who are engaging in collaborative, experimental and exciting work and would benefit from building relationships with UK participants, and who UK participants would greatly benefit from listening and learning from their world view and perspectives.



Artist & community sharing event, at HAUS KCH by Borneo Bengkel



# Human-Nature Delegates' Essays

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Over ten intense days, the cohort met with 250 artists, climate activists, researchers, academics, Civil Society Organisations and community leaders. The exchanges left deep impressions with the 7 UK delegates who wanted to respond to the exchange with seven essays which are part of this document and illustrate the depth of the conversations and dialogues they were able to engage in. The topics of coloniality, identity, extractive economies, displacements and trauma. These are some of the hard yet most important topics we hope Human-Nature will be able to address through our upcoming pilot fellowship programme. The delegation was an amazing opportunity for the seven UK delegates to hear from the communities themselves their struggles and hopes. The following essays are the delegates' responses to this experience. We hope that Human-Nature will provide a safe space for dialogue, knowledge exchange and inspire artists, creatives, climate organisations and policy makers to work together to create new narratives





## **Emma Nicolson**

### **Head of Creative Arts, Creative Scotland**

#### **Days 1 & 2: Arrival and Introduction to Kuala Lumpur**

The journey began with a very early morning departure from the UK, leading to arrival in the bustling city of Kuala Lumpur. Despite the exhaustion from a 3:30 a.m. start, the excitement of finally reaching equatorial Malaysia was palpable. Our first stop was the British Council offices, where we were treated to lunch and an inspiring talk by Dr. June Rubis, a "recovering conservationist" and expert in environmental geography and political ecology. Dr. Rubis's presentation, titled "Beyond Imperial Modes of Constructed Care," delved into the complex dynamics of conservation in Malaysia. She discussed the significance of Orangutans and the indigenous stewardship of forests, emphasising the impact of mega-dams and the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy, which threatens the sovereignty of indigenous lands. Her insights into ontopistemologies—ways of understanding the world through both ontology and epistemology—were particularly thought-provoking. Dr. Rubis also shared personal stories, including her father's efforts to revive skull rituals, challenging conventional conservationists' approaches and their roles in decolonising environmental practices.

After this enriching session, our afternoon was a complete contrast visiting the iconic Petronas Towers, 451.9 metres high and at one point the world's tallest building and owned by a global Malaysian energy company. The complexities of a relatively young city layered out before us historic villages, colonial buildings, neo-Moorish and Mughal style architecture alongside tower blocks with nature holding on to the few available gaps in between. Exhausted but exhilarated, we finally retired for a well-deserved rest, reflecting on the brilliant insights from the day.

#### **Day 2: Immersion in Temuan Culture and Contemporary Art**

Our second day began with an early visit to the Temuan Cultural Education Centre in Banting, where we met international artist Shaq Koyok and some village elders. The Temuan people shared their struggles against deforestation and land development, emphasizing their deep connection to the land. We learned about their traditional practices, including cooking methods that utilize firewood for its aromatic properties and nutritional benefits, and their use of forest plants in daily life. Shaq Koyok's artwork, deeply rooted in his indigenous identity, illustrated the intersection of art and activism including championing indigenous rights at COP 28. This visit underscored the importance of preserving indigenous knowledge and practices and how they help shed light on the urgent realities faced by those directly impacted by climate change. Hearing from this group brought home the resilience required from indigenous communities, an insight that would become more and more apparent as the trip progressed.

Returning to Kuala Lumpur, we visited Think City, an organisation dedicated to urban rejuvenation. We explored their placemaking initiatives, which aim to transform public spaces into vibrant community hubs. There was much discussion within the group about the care required regarding the culture sector as a tool for rejuvenation of urban environments. The day concluded with the launch of the Human-Nature Programme at Temu House, a space designed to foster creative and ecological projects. The programme so far has been intellectually stimulating and deeply moving.

#### **Day 3: Exploring Rimbun Dahan and the Freedom Film Network**

We began our third day with a visit to Rimbun Dahan, an arts centre and botanical haven managed by renowned Malaysian architect Hijias Kasturi and his family. Set on fourteen acres, Rimbun Dahan is a sanctuary for traditional and contemporary art forms, offering residencies to artists and researchers. We



toured the lush arboretum and herb garden, learning about the diversity of indigenous plants and their uses. The estate, with its botanical beauties like cardamom, Rangoon creeper, gingers, and butterfly pea, felt like a green oasis, rich with biodiversity and tranquillity – I didn't want to leave!

Lunch at Rimbun Dahan included a panel discussion on engaging with indigenous communities, featuring scientists, artists, and anthropologists. The dialogue provided valuable and confronting perspectives on indigenous rights, colonial legacies, and climate justice. Special thanks to Bilqis Hijjas for hosting this thought-provoking discussion in such an inspiring environment.

Our next stop was the Freedom Film Network, where we met young indigenous filmmakers and watched a screening of one of their impactful films. This encounter highlighted the power of storytelling in advocating for social justice and environmental protection, the project brilliantly showcased the creative talents of Malaysia's youth and the impressive positive impact on their lives gained by working with film.



#### **Days 4 & 5: Borneo – Sarawak's Cultural and Environmental Landscape**

Arriving in Kuching, Borneo, we were hosted by Borneo Bengkel for an immersive experience in Sarawak. Our activities included a visit to Think and Tink, a space revitalised by architect Wendy Teo to support contemporary visual arts and literature. Wendy shared with us how she had brought a formerly iconic supermarket back to life in the pandemic as a space for contemporary practice, establishing Sarawak's first arts space for visual and architectural practice. Bought some wonderful books in their bookshop, the only independent bookshop in all of Sarawak. We met artist-in-residence J r my

[www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature](http://www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature)

Griffaud, who is doing fascinating work in integrating ecology within the gaming space. We also explored local Sarawakian cuisine at Lepau Restaurant, sampling dishes like tuak (rice wine), linopot (red rice wrapped in a large leaf), hinava (ceviche of mackerel in lime juice), and fried durian, each dish offering a taste of the region's culinary heritage.

The following day, we delved into the heritage of the Sarawak Orang Asal (indigenous tribes of Sarawak) at the Borneo Cultures Museum. Despite its exhibits, the museum's colonial interpretations were a stark reminder of the ongoing challenges in decolonising historical narratives. A visit to the Tun Jugah Foundation provided insights into the traditional Iban weaving techniques and the importance of continuing these cultural practices as a living craft. Dr. Peter M.Kedit, a senior advisor to the Foundation, gave us a special tour, explaining the intricate and time-consuming process of Iban ikat weaving, where a single ceremonial piece could take over two years to complete.

In the afternoon, we visited HAUS KCH, an artist collective fostering creative development and environmental activism. Discussions with local artists and activists emphasised the need to address neo-colonial frameworks and support indigenous sovereignty. We met with over 30 artists and environmental activists, exchanging ideas on how to decolonise post-British rule from a neo-colonial framework inherited by Malaysia.

#### **Days 6 & 7: Into the Jungle and Community Engagement**

Our jungle trek to the Kampung villages of Nyegol and Sting, displaced by the Bengoh Dam, was a very poignant experience while also being an absolute highlight for me. Following an amazing experience of trekking in the juggle we listened to stories of resilience and legal battles for land rights, witnessing the communities' efforts to maintain their traditional way of life amidst modern pressures. The beautifully kept and tended villages, growing crops like rice, pineapple, lemongrass, and pawpaw, demonstrated their strong connection to the land it felt very special and brought into sharp focus the efforts of Indigenous communities to protect and conserve their land, and how the actions of big business and governments persistently work to undermine this. We learned how the Indigenous people were striving for a healthier environment, working in an interconnected way with



nature and the very personal cost to them for perusing this way of life.

In Sabah, we visited the PACOS Trust, an organisation supporting indigenous communities through education, organic farming, and social enterprises. Stories from local women about their initiatives in education and environmental stewardship were inspiring and demonstrated the power of community-driven development. They shared their success in setting up a nursery school that teaches children in their native tongue to Malaysian curriculum standards, allowing women to pursue further education and enterprise along with their urban farm which generates quality compost for displaced villagers so they can grow their own food.

### **Days 8 & 9: Sabah's Mangroves and Artistic Spaces**

Our final days in Sabah included visits to the Tanjung Aru Marine Ecosystem Center and the Kota-K arts collective. We learned about community-led conservation efforts in the mangroves and engaged with artists tackling pressing social issues through their work.

Meeting with Pangrok Sulap, an art collective advocating for indigenous rights through traditional

woodcutting and music, and Borneo Komrade, a group supporting stateless people, highlighted the vital role of art in social justice movements. In the afternoon we explored the rich mangrove ecosystems, crucial for protecting coastlines and combating climate change, while reflecting on the impact of conservation practices on local communities.

### **Conclusion: Reflecting on an Unforgettable Journey**

Our time in Malaysia and Borneo was a profound learning experience, revealing the intricate connections between culture, nature, and community. The insights gained from the indigenous communities and their tireless efforts to protect their heritage and environment were invaluable. On returning to Edinburgh, I carry with me a renewed commitment to advocate for indigenous rights and environmental sustainability, inspired by the extraordinary experiences and the resilience of the people we met. The opportunity to participate in the British Council Human-Nature programme as it begins has been incredibly enriching and profound, leaving me with a deeper understanding and appreciation of Malaysia's diverse cultural and environmental landscape.







## Alice Sharp

### Artistic Director, Invisible Dust

How to encapsulate the extraordinary experience of walking in the Borneo rainforest? An experience that has echoed in my mind since I returned to the UK.

It has led to so many new ideas and a commitment to continue listening to and collaborating with the artists, scientists and communities I met.

How often do we 'experience' something new but only on a screen, via Instagram? Or still only partially, mediated through an idea or a preconception?

Before I came on the delegation, I had been reading the philosopher Emmanuel Kant who wrote in the Eighteenth Century and said, in terms of understanding nature "You have to bring your whole being" (to nature) and this was my goal, my hope, to bring my whole being to Borneo. To enter forests and villages, to meet its artists and people, with my whole being. When I walked in the forest I walked, not to get where we were going but to be in that place and that moment as fully as I could. I smelt the rich scents of the forest, I listened to the sounds of the river, I felt the presence of the teeming life. Because I wanted to care about and bring my whole being to the places and the people, I was being given the chance to meet.

To care is a vital and important human emotion which will enable us to work with each other to raise the hidden voices of those suffering from the worst ravages of climate change; the indigenous peoples who are the custodians of some of the most rare and threatened nature on earth.

We experience nature with our senses, entering a forest is unlike being in a manmade building; walking through the forest I heard the birds, the insects and this was nature speaking to me with voices I had never heard before.

Often as I made the recordings, I closed my eyes to shut off my sight and welcomed in the sound. The first is the rainforest, then the immense crashing of a waterfall after heavy rain and [Adrian singing at Haus](#); these were with Borneo Bengkel in Sarawak. There are also recordings of [music created by Sabah's indigenous communities](#) and Forever Sabah. The musicians often played as a welcome to us and I felt the intrinsic interconnection of their music and land.



Gamelan performance at Projek Padi, Sabah

[www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature](http://www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature)



Adrian Jo Miland singing Hireng Di, a Kayan oral traditional called Parap





**Transcription of recorded audio with Lek, a community leader from Kampung Nyegoh who advocated for his village during the dam construction.**

**Alice:** So we got in the boats, and they took us across the reservoir which has been formed by this very controversial dam 15 years ago. To make the dam, they flooded villages of the ancestors of the people we're just about to meet, so communities had to move up higher, to sides of the dam, to the sides of the valley, from a place where their families have been for many many generations. One of the losses was their fruit trees which, fruit trees can live a long time as well, so it's very sad to see that. We went up to the first kampung, had a delicious meal. I saw some pineapples growing in the garden, lime trees, tapioca.

We are now going up to the second village. What strikes me is how absolutely green it all is. The layers of the rainforest; the little shrubs, and edible plants, like mint growing, and the stages of bushes, small trees, and the next layers of trees right up to the absolute gigantic trees with their massive creepers coming down from the dense forest you can't see more than a few meters either side absolutely packed with vegetation. We saw a millipede, amazing mushroom. And we had the wonderful reception of the villagers. They chatted to us about how their rice harvest is affected by climate change and the changing weather patterns which they are all having to get used to. On the way we saw a couple of amazing waterfalls. The waterfalls are so paciferous today because of the extra rain due to climate change, so the whole water was a mass, roaring

mass of water coming down. It was quite spectacular, but you can also see it's eroding the soil when it comes down with such ferocity. This will also be problematic for the villagers going forward, and for the forest and animals.

Thank you so much for bringing us here. It is a very moving day. Thank you.

We've gone across the reservoir again in our little boats with diesel motors. That all too familiar sound. They can get from one area to another much easier than walking through the dense jungle. Now we are going up a little path and I've got corrugated iron either side and wooden huts which are the homes of the villagers that live here. You can hear the cockerels call, see the cockerels and dogs running about. It's wonderful to be here.

**Alice:** Tell me about your village.

**Lek:** This is my village. We've stayed here for 13 years. My old village is not far from here. Maybe we can walk there within 7 minutes, from my old village to the new village. My old village was affected by the dam, so we had to move up higher.

**Alice:** I'm assuming that must be quite a big deal because your ancestors are there, now underneath the water?

**Lek:** Yes, it is.

**Alice:** Is there quite a big feeling of spiritual grief of losing the people due to the flooded dam?

**Lek:** My great grandmother is there. We had to dig the old grave and move their bones and make a new graveyard at the resettlement the government built. It is odd for me.





## Marenka Thompson-Odium

### Research Curator, Pitt Rivers Museum

#### A hundred and ten years in the making: Reflections on the British Council's Human-Nature UK-Malaysia programme

In October 1914, Henry Balfour, first curator of the Pitt Rivers Museum visited the Malaysian peninsula on his return trip from Australia. Over the course of a few days, he travelled north from Kuala Lumpur (KL) to Ipoh, Taiping, and finally Penang. A hundred and ten years later, another PRM curator, me, arrived in KL as a representative of the PRM on the British Council's Human-Nature UK delegation. Our journeys were both undertaken in our official capacities of researchers and curators, and in some ways both similar and wildly different.

On the peninsular, White British Balfour dined with the likes of Mr and Mrs Brookes (White Rajah of Sarawak), frequented exclusive colonial clubs such as the Lake Club in KL and the Perak 'New' Club in Taiping. He spent his days exchanging notes with H.C. Robinson, director of the then Selangor Museum (today National Museum of Malaysia) and Ivor Evans, curator of the Perak State Museum, the first museum (as defined in Eurocentric terms) in Malaysia. Both Robinson and Evans would donate ethnographic material from their respective museums to the PRM that year, which must have thrilled Balfour as he wrote; 'I was able to collect many specimens of interest and to acquire much valuable information on the spot.' Balfour's few days on the peninsula were dominated by the colonial gaze, he was situated in then British Malaya, in which all his interactions and the spaces in which he occupied (museums, clubs and hotels) were 'curated' with Western hegemony in mind.

Perhaps, similarly, I too arrived in Malaysia in a shroud of colonialism, a representative of colonial-era anthropology museum, being hosted by the British Council, which is also reckoning with its hegemonic pasts. The key difference is that this time, said curator is aptly aware of the trappings and legacy of colonialism that linger, that clings to herself, to her

institution (PRM), to her hosts (British Council) and the entity that is Malaysia.

Balfour, perhaps due to his science background, was a keen observer and his reflections resonate deeply with my own observations and discussions around environmentalism, climate change and adaption, that were part of the Human-Nature programme.

Upon his arrival in KL, Balfour wrote; *Tuesday Sept 29- Arrived at Kuala Lumpur (Selangor) at 7:00am. Found Sidgwell on platform...Walked with Sidgwell to Lake View Road overlooking Botanical Gardens. Sensitive plant growing everywhere along the roads, some in flower (small lilac powder-puff life flowers), some seeding. The leaves close instantaneously on being touched or shaken. We then walked about the town & local quarters, largely Chinese shops.*

On the page opposite this diary entry Balfour included a cutting of the Sensitive plant or *Mimosa pudica* as it is scientifically known. The leaves of the cutting permanently shuttered by time. As seen in Balfour's diary entry he writes about the plant's abundance alongside the roads. Similarly, one of the objects given to Balfour from Robinson (Selangor Museum) was a specimen of a plant *Sarmentosa*, now accessioned at the PRM. Robinson documents that the *Sarmentosa* leaves was used by local communities as sandpaper for polishing blow-darts.

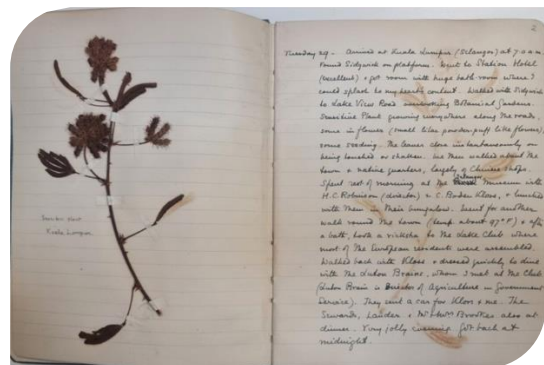


Figure 1 Henry Balfour Diary, Kuala Lumpur-Oxford 1914, Pitt Rivers Museum, Courtesy of Pitt Rivers Museum





Figure 2 *Sarmentosa* specimen, 1914, Copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, Accession #1914.42.28.1

These two plants may seem like an inconsequential in the larger ideas posed by the Human-Nature programme, but I think they are at the core of the very title of the programme. At the PRM it is a known fact that you need to walk through the Oxford University Museum of Natural History (OUMNH) to get to the PRM. The Eurocentric divide of 'human' and 'nature' made starkly apparent by the divide of the two museums. At first glance it is easy to assume that that these two botanical specimens would reside at OUMNH, however they sit within the PRM, in an ethnographic context. Most of the collections stewarded by the PRM are made of organic materials that don't just tell the stories of their makers, but about their makers relationship with 'non-human' nature. Which then brings us back to questions of climate change which arose in the wake of this cleaving of humanity and nature, and what becomes of a maker's practice, a cultural practice, a language in the wake of this massive shift.

In Balfour's diaries we see that shift been played out in real time;

*Wednesday Sept 30- Caught train for Taiping (Perak). Train passed extensive rubber estates, tin-workings & virgin jungle. Jungle is being rapidly cleared, but there are some extensive government reserves. Local huts mostly on piles. Climbing Malacca canes (palms) a feature of the jungle. Flying foxes asleep on the trees. Rivers mostly bright red form the laterite soil. Some way after passing Ipoh + its beautiful marble mountains, the Perak River was crossed. Rice- fields numerous, lotus + other water-lilies abundant + very fine. Rainy afternoon*

*+ floods out near Taiping. Arrived at Taiping at about 3.50pm.*

*Thurs. Oct. 1 Up at 6.15am, rickshaw'd to station & caught 7:30 train for Penang. Very hazy and moist, the rainy season just beginning. Old tin- mining district; paddy- fields and quantities of pink lotus. Arrived at Prai at 11:40am & transferred to ferry steamer, crossing to Penang. The Straits very beautiful.*

The diaries document some welcomed familiar sights such as rice paddies and Malacca palms, but the 'rapidly cleared' forests had come to pass and the 'extensive government reserves', that Balfour referred to were being degazetted in front of my eyes. On our way to visit a Temuan Cultural Centre, we witnessed the clearing of the forest to make space for new shopping centres and water parks- slowly creeping closer and closer to Orang Asli lands. The same lands on which the 'Sensitive' plant was pointed out to me and where I learnt the art of using a blow-dart. The flying foxes, Balfour so readily spied from his train ride from KL to Taiping were not so easily spotted during my trip, the bat now listed on the endangered list due to loss of habitat and excessive hunting. The evidence of the extractivism of colonialism shifting from tin and rubber to other industries such as hydroelectricity and palm oil.

And while it easy from the outside to breezily cast aspersions about the harm caused by the unbridled growth of these industries, my time as part of the delegation was a reminder that there is nuance in all. The original furore of the problematic nature of palm oil and deforestation which bombards Western audiences is tempered by stories of subsistence farmers whose livelihood depend on its production. And yet that thought process still hinges upon the idea of balancing biodiversity and human lives, and not as seeing the two as part of a whole. Or reconciling the growth the renewable energy source of hydroelectricity in the Borneo States of Sarawak and Sabah with the flooding of indigenous kampongs (villages), which results not only in relocation but knock-on effects that make past practices almost impossible.

In the book *Radical Hope, Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Jonathan Lear reflects on how faced with the destruction of the North American Indigenous group Crow's cultural ways of living, when they were forced to live on reservations and give up buffalo hunting, Chief Plenty Coups was able to lead his people to redefine their very ways of existing, so that they would not fall into utter despair. Lear asks, "**when the cultural collapse is such that the old way of life has**

**become not only impossible but retroactively unimaginable,—when nothing one can do (or did) makes sense anymore,—how can one go on?”** This question stayed with me throughout the 10-day delegation trip to Malaysia- the desperate need to find sparks of hope amid examples of continued devastation of the planet, collective and individual lives (human and non-human). The trip was filled with those in the midst of tackling Lear’s question and the generosity that was displayed towards the delegation amidst all this flux was startling, heart-warming, and humbling.

In a time when arts and humanities departments and programmes are constantly being cut and defunded- the fact the delegation trip incorporated the work of the artist, activist, makers, practitioners, farmers showed that there is a place for the arts and humanities in all things. A constant in many of the cultural practices I was privileged to witness and be a part of was the idea of rhythm- like the cycles of rainy and dry, sowing and harvesting seasons, the feet movements of sorting the rice, the motion of the winnowing basket and the trio of thumping the large mortar and pestles- there was rhythm in it all. Those motions of daily life got extrapolated in song, dance and other artforms. The throughline from environment,

cultural practice to artistic response was clear as day. **As a museum curator and historian, I envision my role within the Human-Nature programme as a mere facilitator of making that throughline more visible- especially as erasure and epistemicide have been at the core of many of the issues explored by the programme.** Erasure of spaces, villages, existence, knowledge, generational stewardship of the land and more. If in some way, the programme can aid in combatting the erasure within a pluriversal context of what that means to various diverse groups that make up Malaysia, then it could be a step in the right direction. Museums have historically been places of erasure of the subaltern; redress should be our course of action moving forward.

If one looks back at the image of Balfour’s diary, one can see where the *Mimosa* has left an imprint on Balfour’s words, an artistic design of sorts, now inextricably linked to the action of a person (writing). **It is my hope that the British Council’s Human-Nature programme acts as a conduit through which we can work on making that ‘impression’ and re-establishing that link and empowering those who have fought to maintain said link for generations and beyond.**







**Alysha Nelson**  
**Artist**

### All Roads Lead Back to British Empire

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**The intersection between climate resilience, preservation, and cultural advocacy is a complex one. What could be the importance of arts and expression within this space?**

One of the first questions I was asked on this trip from another delegate was - 'What does decolonising mean to you?' A heavy question. It's also something I've contended with in all of my works, and for most of my life; childhood spent in Southeast Asia and now living in London.

Before proceeding, it is essential to acknowledge the positioning that informs my perspective. My UK residence means my privilege lies in my proximity to centres of economic and cultural power. My life in London affords me the opportunity and artistic freedom to operate virtually free from censorship and the threat of political violence - something that I would not have in Malaysia. This is a reality that underscores the profound asymmetries of the global order.

To understand what decolonising means, I believe we need to first understand the relationship between the global 'primary' and 'periphery', and the associated asymmetries of power. Historically, colonialism operated on a hierarchical model, with the colonisers asserting dominance over the colonised. It is essential to recognise that this dynamic is not static but ever-evolving, in direct response to shifting geopolitical, economic, and social forces. As the relationship between colonial powers and their ex-colonies morph, so too have the systems of oppression and exploitation - adapting to changing sociopolitical contexts. This is how the empire prevails.

For system(s) of oppression to persist, they cannot simply rely on dictatorship but need also be legitimised and internalised by the oppressed themselves. This is what we see happening in Malaysia.

Colonialism was never just a political or economic project, but also a cultural one, predicated on the imposition of Western ideologies and values upon indigenous societies. This cultural hegemony not only transformed social frameworks but also deeply changed the relationship between humans and the natural world. Before colonialism, the concept of "the environment" as we understand it today did not exist in most parts of the world. Rooted in the division between 'human' and 'nature', this is an outcome of violent interactions by the coloniser towards the colonised. Colonial powers exploited natural resources with impunity, viewing the environment as a commodity to be exploited for profit rather than a sacred entity to be revered. This legacy of environmental extractivism continues to reverberate throughout Malaysia, posing significant implications in its response to contemporary environmental challenges - all of which are largely dominated by outside perspectives that do not sufficiently engage with the sociopolitical ecology of cultural heritage(s).

Climate and cultural advocacy share a strong nexus. Cultural practices, traditions, and artistic expressions are intimately intertwined with the landscapes, ecosystems, and resources that sustain them. Tethered to their ecological environment, the arts and cultural heritage are born from a foundational, place-based relationship. During my time in Malaysia, I've witnessed the devastating impacts of rising temperatures, extreme weather, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, and habitat destruction. This level of environmental degradation has irrevocably altered the socio-cultural landscapes that nurtured generations, eroding the very foundations of

indigenous identities and livelihoods. As ecological systems are devastated, so too shall the knowledge, practices, histories, and voices of the communities who live within them. This is an issue far beyond colonial parameters of what is 'environmental'. It signifies a profound cultural and social upheaval, one that directly threatens the indigenous and its diaspora.

### Where do we go from here?

It is crucial to address semantics. In the global West, "decolonisation" is often enacted as a symbolic and metaphorical process, focusing on changing objects, ideas, and sociocultural behaviours. In Malaysia and other parts of the world still grappling with the tangible effects of (neo)colonial rule, decolonisation needs to be literal, economic, and concrete. Western interpretations of 'decolonisation' have long dominated the discourse. A conceptual promise overshadowing the actual fallout of colonisation elsewhere; an act of further marginalisation. This privileging of Western values and ideologies persists, frustratingly, even within the discourse about decolonisation. Thus, to decolonise must mean to

My time in Malaysia revealed the profound interconnectedness between colonial legacy, environmentalism, cultural advocacy, and artistic expression. These issues are inherently place-based, making it imperative to acknowledge the links between histories of the empire and our present locations. You cannot talk about climate change, cultural advocacy, and indigenous rights without first acknowledging colonial legacy. All roads lead back to the British Empire.

To move forward is to rethink the empire's impact on cultural identity - particularly through the conceptual discord between where we are, how we got here, and where we can go from here. I've noticed conversations about border politics, legacy, conservation, and identity all seem to lead back to questions of WHO AM I / WHERE IS MY PLACE / HOW DO I BELONG IN THIS WORLD. This is a juncture to inspect and acknowledge - the liminal space between 'how we are represented' and 'who are we representing'.

Within the realms of climate resilience, this means an urgent rupture to move past colonialist knowledge (re)production. To directly challenge the extractive norms of our current economic model. To reimagine

The dispossession of lands, the displacement of communities, and the erosion of cultural identities are stark reminders of the enduring legacy of colonialism, which continues to shape social, economic, and political dynamics within Malaysian society. The empire remains enforced in every aspect of life - not even hiding but in plain sight.

critically reimagine the blueprint not merely as a theoretical practice but in active motion; to interrogate and demolish power dynamics and structural inequalities that uphold this global order.

Those who profit from prevailing paradigms will always be motivated to perpetuate them. We must move beyond the dominant canon to have a more intercultural conversation. We need a new vocabulary, a new grammar, a new language. Arts and culture can help humanity explore this. The arts and heritage are not a fixed narrative, but a construct always in the making. Its fluidity makes it the perfect tool to explore the ever-shifting relationship between Coloniser x Colonised.

ecological and economic abundance not as excess, but as having precisely what is needed to sustain. To shift towards circularity and reciprocity with our ecosystems. To centre indigenous voices. The arts can provide a safe space; a seminal point of departure from conventional knowledge construction and dissemination. To reimagine, to bear witness, to hope.

A profound sadness followed me throughout my time in Malaysia. A different, softer kind of grief I couldn't quite place. This is still my home, and to witness it so broken and exposed was painful. Months later as I'm sat in conversation with another Malaysian artist, she mutters in passing, "Malaysia has so much potential". I realise I'm grieving something that has never existed.

This is the role of the arts. To live within this abstract, liminal space. To be a metaphorical bridge between echoes of the past and new realities. To give rise to diverse genealogies beyond dominant ideals. To provide a pool of insights and understandings from which we gather in order to act. To make it clear that possibility and change will always be faithful to us. This is the importance of arts and expression.





## Ashish Ghadiali

### Radical Ecology

#### SUBMERGED PERSPECTIVE

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When, along with other UK delegates selected by the British Council for the launch of Human/Nature, I boarded the plane from Heathrow airport to Kuala Lumpur in late February 2024, it was almost a decade since I had last participated in a long-haul flight from Europe to Asia. In recent years, my practice as a climate justice activist, while focused, on the one hand, on unfolding solidarity with communities living on the frontlines of environmental breakdown in the global south, has also been idiosyncratically geared towards uncovering the meaning of climate justice in the corner of South-West England where I live – a region where some 95% of the population (across Devon, Cornwall, Plymouth, Somerset and Dorset) identifies as White and where historic connections to transatlantic slavery, and to acts of genocide and ecocide in global regions including Australasia and the South Pacific, remain awkwardly entangled with official notions of regional civic pride.

On the one hand, the opportunity to be led, by the British Council, to the homes and villages of indigenous communities in Borneo felt like the gift of a broader horizon that could help to more effectively centre the voices and experiences of communities confronted by extremes of climate vulnerability in my own work. On the other hand, it's hard not to question the cost of carbon emissions involved in the travel – an issue that activists from the UK collective, [Plane Stupid](#), have worked to raise awareness around over many years. In 2024, the problem of carbon emissions incurred along this flight route is further exacerbated by the geopolitical dynamics of the war in Ukraine. We're compelled to fly around not through Russian airspace, - over the Yerevan mountains, Iran and Afghanistan, over Amritsar and Jaipur, Port Blair and Phuket - before descending on Kuala Lumpur. Whilst marvelling at the sight of this sublime night journey that unfolds outside my cabin window, and using the on-board wi-fi to share the view with my children back in Devon, I also worked out, in the margins of my notebook, that the additional carbon emitted as a consequence of this reroute alone is the same as would come from driving all the way around the world.

[www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature](http://www.britishcouncil.my/programmes/arts/humannature)

Reflecting on this unsettling dimension of global travel in 2024, I emerged from the red-eye flight into a new day in Malaysia committed to making the most of an extraordinary opportunity to further action and research around the following questions. Firstly, what are the ways that human creativity can and does contribute to the emergence of a just and sustainable planet? Secondly, how do we deliver on climate adaptation in a world defined not only by rising atmospheric temperatures but also by the rapidly escalating vulnerability that comes with global warming? The work I've been doing, alongside the University of Exeter's Professor Tim Lenton, [around projected movement in the human climate niche \(HCN\)](#), offers new perspectives around the future context in which climate adaptation in Malaysia will take place during the course of the 21st century. All species exist within niches where the conditions of the planet best support our specific biophysical needs and one way to read and measure the impacts of climate change on the future of human life is to map projected movement in the human climate niche at successive intervals of global warming.

Our calculations suggest that, should current policy commitments on decarbonisation play out, nearly 28 million Malaysians could be displaced outside of the HCN by 2070, 32 million by 2100 [where the projected total population is around 42 million (2070) and 39 million (2100) respectively]. These are startling projections. Much of the coverage of our research has, to-date, focused on the case studies of India and Nigeria, where the total projections for displacement by 2100 are highest [600 million and 300 million respectively]. However, the Malaysia example points towards the possibility of 82% displacement within the borders of a single country [versus the Indian example of 39% displacement] and, therefore, towards a crisis of coming climate vulnerability that is perhaps not yet centre-stage in either domestic or global thinking about Malaysia's climate future. Getting to grips with what this data means for the future of climate adaptation in Malaysia was therefore central to my own objectives at the outset of this trip as well as the ongoing consideration of the potential for artists, activists and scientists to engage art and culture as a way of facilitating broader shifts in human

consciousness around these questions. It's this approach, of transformation through research and culture, that broadly informs the work of the organisation I co-founded in 2021, Radical Ecology.

Within hours of our arrival, we had the great privilege of an audience at the British Council offices in Kuala Lumpur with Dr June Rubis, an honorary member and former co-chair of the Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas [ICCAs] consortium. Dr Rubis has an academic background in conservation biology and has also conducted [research on the subject of ritual revitalisation in Sarawak](#), which is seen, in her terms, as a visionary approach to climate adaptation that centres community cohesion and environmental connection through connection to ancestral knowledge, and where her interest has been informed by the practices of her late Bidayuh father, who in turn followed his own parents' journey as a traditional Bidayuh priest and priestess. Dr Rubis' presentation to our delegation highlighted how the Green Wave in Malaysian Development, underpinned by the ambition to [reach a target of 70% renewable energy by 2050](#), relies, as with so many previous waves of Malaysian development, on the ongoing dispossession and displacement of indigenous people where, [according to the Sarawak-based NGO, Save Rivers](#), the Sarawak Corridor of Renewable Energy (SCORE), a development corridor made up of 12 hydroelectric dam projects that was launched in 2011, saw the displacement, with the completion of the 2400 MW Bakun dam alone, of some 10000 people from indigenous communities including from the Kajang, Kayan, Kenyah, Lahanan, Penan and Ukit ethnic groups. Subsequent projects including the 944 MW Murum dam, completed in 2013, displaced around 1500 people from 8 Kenyah and Penan communities. Ironically, as Dr Rubis' research has demonstrated, the way of life that is being destroyed by these acts of mass displacement is one that is rich in values including community cohesion and environmental connection. These are values that can support precisely the resilience needed to withstand an era of escalating global warming. By contrast, communities forced into the alienated setting of resettlement camps are driven, by relocation, into conditions of precarity and rising climate vulnerability.

This is the paradox of development as seen from the viewpoint of indigenous dispossession in Malaysia. It's a model of development that UK observers must acknowledge as so profoundly tied up with the legacy of British imperialism in Malaysia. This includes the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century adventurer, James Brooke who, in 1841, quelled a Dayak rebellion for the

Sultan of Brunei and was gifted the kingdom of Sarawak in return, going on to expand the state by force and open up trade routes and commercial forestry lines across the territory, whilst also initiating a private family dynasty that would dominate politics in Sarawak for more than a hundred years. It also encompasses the evolution of Britain's mid-20<sup>th</sup> century dependency on Malayan rubber and tin, which by the end of the Second World War was so great that it supported the UK's entire debt bill to the USA, motivating the Attlee and then the Churchill governments to resist movements for the communist liberation of Malaya at all cost including through the development of pioneering new tactics for counter-insurgency including torture manuals that would later be emulated by the French in Algeria and the USA in Iraq, chemical warfare (Agent Orange), later used by the USA in Vietnam, and concentration camps, sold to the British public at the time as resettlement projects, that would be deployed again by the British against the Mao-Mao in Kenya. Many of the Malaysian artists, academics and curators that we had the fortune to meet and connect with in Kuala Lumpur, including Mark Teh, Nadira Ilana, Bilqis Hijjas and Dr Vilashini Somiah, repeatedly invited us to reflect on these connections, and to consider what it might mean, within the slipstream of this history, to be a British delegation seeking out collaboration with artists and communities now confronted by a future of global warming in Malaysia - a future that Britain, as pioneer of the first industrial revolution, was instrumental in propagating around the world.

This was the background to field trips, led by Borneo Bengkel in Sarawak and Forever Sabah in Sabah, to the homes of indigenous families that have been resettled, following the submergence of their ancestral lands for big dam projects. In Sarawak, the Bengoh Dam is a 127 square kilometre expanse of submerged forest, part of the infrastructure that now supplies the city of Kuching with its water. The area is now being developed by the state government for tourism and here, our guide, Lek, introduced us to his uncle, Simuh, at their home in Kampung Nyegol, where Simuh talked to us about the pressure he and his family are subjected to, to quit the area entirely and surrender a way of life rooted in forest agriculture for what would ultimately be a form of assimilation with the juggernaut of urban modernity. Here, the artist and poet Bethany Luhong Balan, part of the Borneo Bengkel collective, also shared memories of her own family's displacement, more than a decade earlier, from the Bakun Dam area near Mhiri, an experience that she has captured to great effect in her essay, [Above a drowned world existence is](#)



resistance, while in Sabah, looking over the Babagon Dam which, in turn, supports the water infrastructure of the booming city of Kota Kinabalu beneath it, we heard from residents of resettled villages how years of grassroots resistance to the dam and campaigns for a just settlement on land compensation and water provision had been thwarted by a project that, while providing water to the capital city, undermined the watershed, creating conditions of local drought.

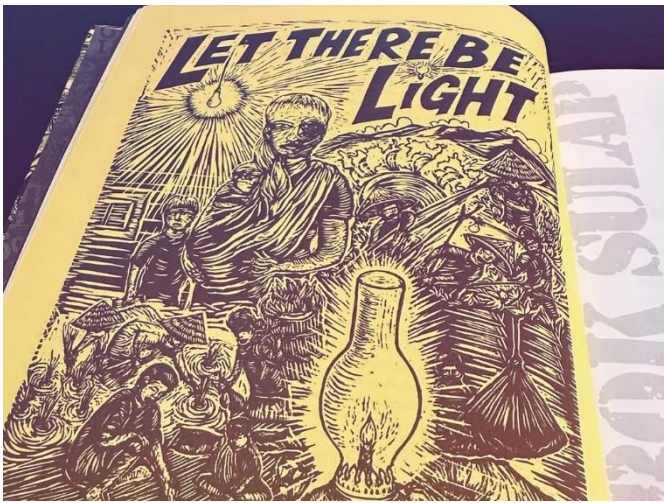
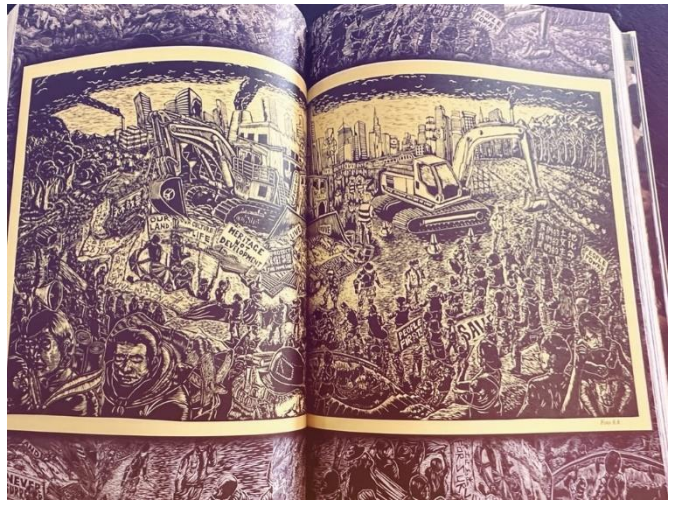
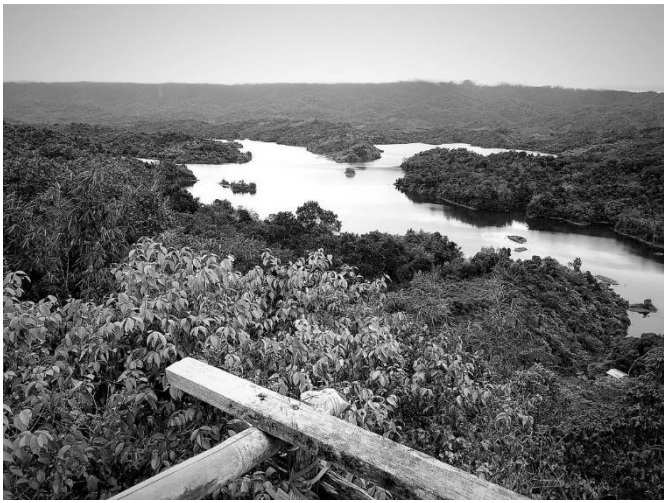
To hear such testimony first hand is also to recognise the dysfunction of the paradigm of development that continues to unfold in our time. It's a paradigm that sits at the roots of global warming and that all too often plays out in our approach to the solutions to climate change as well, reinforcing and even exacerbating existing inequalities and so deepening injustice. Yet to hear such testimony is also to glimpse the possibility of other ways of living in the world, an experience that resonates with the writing of decolonial theorist, Macarena Gomez-Barris who, in her text, *The Extractive Zone* (Duke University Press, 2017) writes: "Central to how I analyse colonial capitalism and the possibilities of the future is the critical task of perceiving life otherwise, or what I refer to as "submerged perspectives" that allow us to see [the] local knowledge that resides within what power has constituted as extractive zones." Based on her own research into indigenous struggle and creative resistance in Latin America, Gomez-Barris argues that "in each of these places, submerged perspectives pierce through the entanglements of power to differently organise the meanings of social and political life." It's an analysis that speaks deeply to the context of indigenous displacement in North Borneo. In Gomez-Barris's words, "the possibility of decolonisation moves within the landscape of multiplicity that is submerged perspectives."

It's this possibility that moves through the experience and testimony of Uncle Simuh and in the writings of Bethany Balan Luhong. We met it again, in such majestic form, in the company of the artist collective, Pangrok Sulap, who shared their practice of deep engagement, in service of the building of a common story, with indigenous and rural communities across

Sabah who are living within and resisting this dominant paradigm of development. It's this possibility, of art and culture as a strategy for making new worlds together that landed on this trip for me with the clamour of a clarion call.

When I get home, I drag the kids and the dog out to Sheepstor and Burrator on a rainy Saturday afternoon. I'd read, while sitting in the hotel lobby in Kuching, that James Brooke, the "White Rajah of Sarawak" and his descendants were buried there - about half way from the village where I live to Plymouth where I often work. The celebrated author, Joseph Conrad, drew on Brooke's legend when he wrote *Lord Jim*, which in turn served as a prototype for the character, Kurtz, in *The Heart of Darkness*, who Marlon Brando later immortalised in the American New Wave adaptation by Francis Ford Coppola, *Apocalypse Now*. But when James Brooke became ill later in life, he didn't surrender, like his literary and cinematic counterparts, to a tragic and exotic fate informed by the horrors of the imperialist project. He retired to Dartmoor, where he died in 1868. The revised version of "A Perambulation of Dartmoor", published in 1896, clocks his grave there as a landmark, and also notes how "this little village is now very busy, the important new works in connection with the water supply of Plymouth, going on close by, and altering the face of the country by the damming up of a valley from the construction of a vast reservoir". ["Sheepstor", it notes, is also "the reputed home of the pixies who store the precious metals which are said to be hidden [in the Pixy Cave]".] Burrator Reservoir - historic replacement to the earlier infrastructure of Drake's 16th century leat - which still supplies Plymouth's water more than a century later, is now owned and managed by Southwest Water, who spilt sewage 58,000 times across England in 2023 in what amounts to a spill event lasting 530,000 hours or 61 years. Shit. This is a model of development that we are still exporting at scale. I stop in at a petrol station on the way home. The local candidate of the new right wing start up party, Reform, is on the front page of the Totnes Times. He "questions the need to cut our emissions quickly". He shares his "views on immigration". He thinks "we're losing our identity".





images by Ashish Ghadiali







## Lucy Byatt

### Director, Hospitalfield

#### Gardens and walks and warmth and colour

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Arriving back in London from Malaysia, cold and wind swept and grey, its March. At Heathrow we say farewell to our fellow travellers and I sit in the airport just for a while, to acclimatise and have coffee after that flight. They are all rushing to catch connections, I have just my route in to London to do and its early morning, too early for checking in to the hotel. I'm staying in London for a few nights before going back to rural Scotland.

I look at my e mails; our small town of Arbroath, just 27,000 in population, has been awarded £20m from central government to be spent over ten year, (this means London not the Scottish Government in Edinburgh). A Levelling Up Grant, rhetoric that we have all become so used to but never stop questioning the irony of this strategy supposed to address inequality. I hear the words of the artist Emma Hart in my head *"I don't want to level up, why can't we level down"*. This is all about class not wealth sharing – its about how 'they' think everyone should aspire to live just like 'them'.

Arbroath is a poor town, all its industries lost, now, with this new money, caught in the glare of 'award' and the agenda between London and Edinburgh. A Town Committee is to be assembled. There is a call for someone in the community to become the chair. It's a big swerve of democracy; imperfect though local democracy is, it is a system we sign up to. This all spells division.

The e mail sitting there waiting for me on that cold morning throws me right back to the conversations that we had been having just a few days before in the hot moist, blooming luscious Borneo jungle with the activists that we had been so fortunate to have met with on this extraordinary trip.

I write this many months after having returned so I am picking at my memory, conscious of the experiences that I still think of today. All the time I consider how

some future connections might emerge between my institution and the network of artists and others around it could be linked to this place so far away. A place that only I, within my network, have had the great fortune to have had a glimpse in to. Relationships through common experience seem essential to identify.

Access to land and land rights and power and commerce. That day, that big walk where we climbed the final hill, to the top of the hill village. Sonia from Borneo Bengkel so generously translated the story of the man who had fought for his land and his traditional way of life. He had in so many ways won, but he had lost so much too. The division within the community was evident. Government offering deals, coercion, incentives, whatever this might be called. Dividing the community who see that settling for a house on the edge of the city and a few acres of land and to start a new type of life might be the option of least resistance and they might not have had the energy to resist. This is so forgivable.

Leaving a life that is so close to the land, to give it all up, centuries of tradition – this is a painful thing. At a time when this way of life, lived in a way that is such a light touch on the land, a coexistence that has thrived for centuries, should be something that we are emulating not something we are destroying. A life where there is no need to coin the phrase 'more than human'. This is a community who instinctively know about longevity and balance.

Miles away in KL where the decisions are being made, a government official who can see the potential of a business plan for a hydro damn, questions why this community still want to live this traditional lifestyle.

As we rush through the utterly beautiful lake on speed boats, it took me a while to read the landscape. This manmade landscape that produces the energy to power the city that we have just come from. It appears so natural, just the dead trees emerging like white

bones giving away that only very recently this was forest not waterway. Forests where people lived, children were born and educated, where villages had been submerged, creatures had fled up the hillsides as the water rushed in.

A costly feat of engineering where decisions were made a long way away, looking at a map.

At Hospitalfield we have a collection of early maps – the first commissioned for the east coast of Scotland, by the landowners. They needed a map to say which part of the land belonged to them. Maps are always about ownership and distant decision making – carving things up without seeing what is really there on the ground. A distancing that we can think of in a gendered way as well as colonial.

I am reminded of the Highland Clearances. After the Reformation the Scottish portioned out the land and it was given to the noble families. In England, something similar, the Enclosure Acts that took away the common land making it impossible for people to grow enough

food to feed their families. Our recent *Grow Up* programme (see *Grow Up* a festival on vertical farming programmed by Hospitalfield), invited Flo Dill to speak on the topic of the history of the allotment and of course we discover that these are plots of land designed to control us not to ease our ability to own and use land in the city. (see Flo Dill [nts.live](#) digging with Flow).

On writing this I immediately see that there is a huge potential to introduce Flo to Wendy Teo – I will do this and see what turns up. The horticulturalist Nigel Dunnett spoke of the nonsense of the naming of certain plants as indigenous – these arguments are always contextual as he spoke of the boarders from one US state to another suggesting that the seed heads should read the boarder. One state claiming a particular plant as indigenous whilst the neighbour does not. Here we are again victims of mapping. The western context and therefore debate around indigeneity very different from the one we were presented with in Malaysia.





The towns and villages of the Highlands of Scotland creating a life for themselves as tenants, eking out their existence in this unforgiving yet breath taking landscape; crops, sheep, and fishing. Suddenly in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new form of sheep farming was adopted by the landowners and these communities were cleared off the land in two waves. The remains of the villages still clear to see in the landscape. Today they are markers for the active holiday makers; camping, walking, pathfinding. These villages, skeletons of the past communities that lived on the land, much like the tops of the trees in Sarawak, reaching from their submersion. It takes a quick search on-line to find that we have taken a boat across one of the fastest growing international trades, the hugely powerful hydro power industry is the future. It's a vast beast to be up against.

I suddenly think of the image that one of our group took as we came down the hill from the village. An elderly woman had put on her makeup and positioned herself in the doorway of her village house, she was weaving. She was beautiful, and here was tourism in the making – she was performing for us – she was there because we were there. What does this create? Where have we seen this happen before in other places? No one is questioning our power as spectators, disturb the complex infrastructure of a place that is under threat and perhaps can only survive through tourism – is this the future? Can this be kept in check by the community and used as activism rather than create the entire village as performance.

Somehow there seems to be a plan for Borneo – between the Malaysian and Indonesian governments. In indication of this is where property in Kuching is being bought up speculatively by developers, let out to creative organisations. All I can think of is the pattern of instrumentalism that we are so familiar with in the UK, coined by Richard Florida, *The Flight of Creative Classes*. (see also Jane Jacobs on the gentrification of New York).

Here I can only see the cynicism of the developer and not the awakening of the creatives themselves to see where they could use their power, now at this moment, before it is too late. They seem complicit, unaware of their use in this real-estate story but perhaps I am not understanding.

The Government, changing landscape and potentially the climate within the agenda of an economic plan through the business of hydro. Whilst the private

sector is buying up and settling down on their investment, waiting for the land prices to increase thanks to the strategy of bringing in the artists. This would be such a productive debate, to learn from the mistakes of the arts community in the big, now impossible to live in cities, in the UK.

Our host in the village describes the four acres and a new house that the Malaysian Government were offering families. Undermining the village structure and creating nuclear families. The Highland clearances moved communities in to the big cities where many died of disease in the overcrowding. Or off they sailed to create the diasporic communities that have such close ties with Scotland today in the US and Australia, Canada (where in my experience everyone thinks they are Scottish).

I would have loved to have had access to an economist who could describe this complex web, the compulsion of government investment; between the Borneo Cultures Museum, where tourists were coming to celebrate the indigenous cultures yet in reality we are seeing their destruction. The labelling in places describing the cultures that we know exist in the past tense.

We all know that museumising something is to knock the oxygen from the power of its objectness. The two experiences together; the journey in to the forest and the journey of the museum – two days of great learning through experience thanks to the planning and wisdom of Borneo Benkel.

In the little town of Arbroath, we had been chosen because of the poverty, lack of industry, but most cynically of all because this is an elderly population. We can see this changing but statistically, still full of retired people or farmers who are likely to vote to the right. So we see an election ahead, all the calculations are done and here comes to £20m like some sort of bribe.

The chair of the board, a nice man, we haven't even had our first meeting yet and he is talking about building a helipad for visitors from St Andrews. Cllr Speed and I catch each other's eye and smile. This he calls is punching above our weight. I will buy him a copy of *The Flight of the Creatives*.

We moved on to Sabah. An extraordinary time with such generous hosting from Cynthia and her astonishing organisation Forever Sabah. It is hard to find an NGO of a similar nature, supported through one person, that is so effective in the context of climate

change and social activism. The research that she is investing in, the knowledge that she is collecting, this is powerful and therefore exciting to understand how it will unfold in to the future.

Her model of bringing everyone together in the countryside, around learning and conversation and food is very similar to Hospitalfield.

For me the crystallisation of our visit here was the meeting with Pangrok Sulap. I was at Documenta and saw the programme created by the Indonesian collection ruangrupa. It was impressive. I was surprised when Florence told me that they felt they were not well treated and this was felt to be about race or as a result of a particular sort of colonisation.

There is no doubt at all that they had a difficult time, but this was about their brilliant curatorial narrative coming up against the powerful Jewish lobby and these two pressures creating great change in the western art world. This is causing utter chaos throughout and Documenta may never happen again as result. This is not because of rungrupa but is the state-of-the-art world and the way that it has been financed.

Perhaps the global art world with its centre in Europe is over. Pangrok Sulap have positioned their practice

has so wonderfully, using this context as an effective conceptual component part of their activist practice. If this world changes, as it seems to be, I am sure their astuteness will lead them to find another way.

Quite apart from their wood cuts being so beautifully made, their stories negotiated and produced through conversation with their own communities, combined with the artist's decision to use this highly crafted process initially as performance is powerful.

The peeling back of the paper from the vast flat wooden 'plate', for a printmaker is always revelatory. To recognise this as having potential as performance, shared experience with the global art world audiences, is such a simple yet effective vision. The images of the crowd around the event makes me feel that I wished that I was there. To find a way to monetise their work as performance and then as product, i.e. the print, then to use this economy to invest in the villages where the images were made has a beautiful symmetry.

This is wonderful effective conceptual art and I so enjoyed being in their studio, seeing their world at home in Sabah. They have made their activism and so their work powerful and they seem to have a sustainable collective practice which I admire greatly.





## Kim Wide

### CEO & Artistic Director, Take a Part

My background is in Socially Engaged Arts practice (SAE), a dialogue where, through art, we explore ourselves, our interpersonal relationships, our communities and our wider world and we find ways to activate it, expose it, challenge it, celebrate it, mourn it or invite a wider discussion or activism around it. It was birthed out of a community arts practice and sits in a grassroots context. It is about people starting movements together.

I work, from my organisation Take A Part, with communities in the UK underrepresented and underserved and experiencing historic and systemic social injustice. Communities that have a parent-child relationship with our government and local authorities. These communities are often told they do not deserve the things they want. They are often told that they should be happy with what they have already and not demand more or better. They have less opportunity and less visibility.

Yet, by taking an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach (building on what is already there in terms of skills and resources), we support communities to set ambitions for themselves and use creativity, culture, heritage and environmental projects to take actions and lead on change where they live, to demand the changes they want to make and to learn the skills and approaches to help them make that happen. To make changes to educational attainment, to job prospects, to infrastructure, to health and wellbeing and to have the skills to sustain them for themselves.

In March, I was honoured to be able to travel to Borneo with the British Council Human-Nature delegation to gain insight into the context of arts, environment and culture within the Malaysian Borneo context and, through this delegation, consider ways to share and support cultural exchange and partnerships from it.

Over 10 days, we visited museums and galleries, met researchers and scientists, engaged with botanists and oceanographers, visited communities and rights led organisations. It was hugely rich and extremely challenging at so many points but really profound.

What was most affecting for me, was the time spent with community and voluntary social enterprises (CVSEs) working at the coal face of the immense challenges and changes to Indigenous ways of life from colonisation, globalisation, capitalism and the resulting environmental crises emerging from rapid industrialisation.

The threats are coming from all sides. The construction of dams to feed the growing need of fresh water for expanding cities means tribal villages are being flooded, the monocultural farming practices of industrial scale is deforesting swathes of primal forests, mining is scarring and polluting rivers that people rely on for food.

The resulting environmental crisis is very present. The indigenous communities see it all first hand. Communities are unsure of when to plant rice, the rains are unreliable, there are droughts, the heat is intense and the water temperature changes mean the fish that are relied on are depleting rapidly.

Indigenous groups have lived on their lands in the closest proximity to nature for thousands of years. They know it intimately. It shapes language, customs and culture. The ways of living, working, celebrating, sharing, and learning are sophisticated and come from a deep 'knowing' trust in it.

This confidence has become challenged by the threat that capitalism, globalisation and the resulting environmental urgencies have created. Indigenous communities, many of them peri-urbanised due to the expansion of cities and infrastructures are working at huge lengths to preserve and conserve their ways of living and connecting to one another.

Globally, 36% of the world's remaining intact forests are on Indigenous Peoples' lands. Indigenous People make up 6% of the global population and account for 19% of global extreme poverty. Indigenous communities are safeguarding 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity. They speak more than 4,000 of the world's 7,000 languages.

This pressure and threat has created an urgency, but also a tenacity, a dedication and fierceness to stem this tide of change without choice is profound.



The years of the ongoing parent-child relationship that government systems and policies have created to ensure that they can continue rapid development are being countered.

Organisations like Save Rivers, Tuyang and PACOS (among so many other NGOs) are collaborating with their communities to capacity build for change. We in turn, should lean into this expertise that has been built within these NGOs and the communities they support capacity building and increase the skills, networks and capacity within the organisations to use creativity as a development tool.

The indigenous rights of land management and care that help balance our world must be maintained. We need to put global pressure on this issue. And we need to build capacity for better outcomes for future threatened people. Their way of life needs to be protected.

My call to action within all of this is not to just commission art projects that talk ABOUT the emergency we are seeing within Indigenous communities in Borneo, but to deeply partner with those communities and the NGOs serving them to use

creativity as a means to capacity build - to tell their own stories but also to share ways that action is being taken. We need to share models, networks and approaches towards a global collective action, share tools and our own capacities, to co-create together programmes that are longer form and really lean into the long term approaches needed to create change-making creative processes, to bring others into the networks and partnerships to create a groundswell of change.

Sustainability is key. We don't want to build short term support, care and confidence. We want to start and build and within the work we do, ensure we embed the means to carry on, to build forward, to work from strength to strength. Collaborating with the organisations and groups that are already capacity building DIRECTLY to increase the ability to mobilise and use creativity as a means to develop and share approaches. Change comes from the edges, the grassroots. We have in our hands the solutions to the pressing global issues of our day, and we need to explore ways to develop and share them.

**We don't need showcases, we need systems.**



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