Traditional Medicines of Borneo at risk

As President of the Sarawak Dayak National Union, representing the indigenous people of Sarawak, Malaysia, Nicholas Bawin Anggat (at left) quietly discussed the plight of his people in Borneo (and ultimately, the world) at the College of Public Health this May. Although traditional medicines in Borneo are providing effective treatments, cures, and preventative applications, numerous barriers are blocking their use.

Caught between the expanding timber trade, land loss/degradation/erosion, and the lack of interest and knowledge in learning about traditional medicines among the younger generation, he and others are struggling to retain and pass on the knowledge, the practices, and to preserve and promote the biodiverse natural resources that remain. Some forests are now in reserves, not for purposes of herb development, but for future forests. The situation of medicine and resource losses contrasts with the country’s policy (this part of Borneo is within Malaysia). According to Malaysia’s National Policy on the Traditional/Complementary medicines (T/CM): “For the past decades, traditional medicine has made significant contributions to the health care of our people. . . . It is widely acknowledged that the use of Traditional or Complimentary Medicines is widespread and increasing. Malaysia’s rich tropical biodiversity is a now addressing its full potential.” But, policy and practice are not consistent. Moreover, if the Dayaks (his group), are successful in increasing medicinal plant production and distribution, local people are greatly concerned about potentially losing native customary rights to the herbs, given widespread interest from pharmaceutical companies in owning natural medicine sources.

There is a fine balance to tread—convincing the Dayak youth to learn about the medicines (to carry on indigenous knowledge and practice), ensuring that local communities protect the trees, convincing forestry companies to avoid cutting in rainforests where the herbs thrive, gaining government support to protect the remaining forest areas, promoting and expanding the use of the herbs, while protecting those herbs from ownership claims by outside companies, which would result in complete loss of the Dayaks' traditional medicine. He shared his comprehensive plan to ensure safe quality of traditional medicines and practices for the broader public. This plan would integrate safe traditional medicines and practices into the national healthcare system, including research, methods and technologies for quality control, safety and efficacy of herbal medicines and traditional remedies, using an information database of medicines for healthcare providers, consumers, manufacturers and other agencies.

The Iban also shared examples of effective traditional medicines. In his case, he had suffered a heart attack from which his cardiologist proclaimed he would never recover to live a full life. Local traditional practitioners recommended he try Tungkat Ali, and one month later his physician was astonished at his excellent echocardiogram. He described sixteen plants and their uses, and mentioned that these are free, “you can walk
out to a tree and harvest your medicine”, compared to getting a prescription and going to
the pharmacy and paying for Western medicine.

Nicholas Bawin Anggat is a member of the Iban people of Borneo, famous for their
traditional healing practices (as well as such former customs as headhunting, which he is
proud to point out!). With no formal education system, the rural communities are quite
poor compared to western standards—and since World War II, their surrounding land and
natural resources have been significantly depleted. Representing the Dayak people of
Sarawak, Malaysia, Nicholas was in the US to participate in the sixth session of the UN