BOOK REVIEWS

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Changing Pathways: Forest Degradation and the Batek of Pahang, Malaysia.

Lye Tuck-Po’s recent book offers an engaged account of the Batek, as they negotiate the changing natural, social and political landscape of Malaysia. Her innovative work makes an important contribution to a recent and welcome trend in ethnobiological research, what Eugene Hunn calls “Ethnobiology IV” (2002, 2007). Hunn describes this stage as ethnobiology “of by and for indigenous peoples, traditional societies and local communities” (2002:4). Lye’s reflexive account aims to grasp the Batek’s experiences and perspectives on making a living in changing circumstances. This account includes traditional ethnographic fare such as periodic hunts for game or wild yams, and also interactions with tourists, rattan traders and government officials. Although this book provides many details about the Batek’s particular understandings of the landscape, plants and animals, Lye’s consistent attention to the larger social and political context makes this book a form of intervention.

Scholars face a difficult task in analyzing the cultural and livelihood effects of massive environmental change. Addressing these issues is always challenging, and Lye succeeds in many ways. Whereas older scholarship tended to present a fairly static and timeless picture of local interactions with the surrounding environment, Lye shows us how Batek react to and engage with these changes. There is a growing awareness that culture is necessarily hybrid and flexible, and many fears about an inevitable process of “cultural extinction,” common in the 1980s, have not come to pass. Yet, this sense must also be reconciled with attention to the larger context in which people live. Lye does not shy away from this task, and shows how much of the forest that the Batek have used was converted into massive monocultural palm oil plantations, settlements, or well-manicured golf courses. Lye also refuses the romanticization of indigenous ways, even undercutting the ways in which Batek may idealize their own past in relation to the present, but she also reminds readers that in earlier times, Batek were subject to lowlander’s slave-raiding expeditions. This historical perspective is important, but overall, the past few decades receive relatively short shrift in the book. A greater sense of this period in terms of changes in the physical and cultural landscape would strengthen our understanding of what makes the Batek’s current situation distinct from the recent past.

Changing Pathways provides a number of engrossing stories, three of which I briefly describe. First, Lye’s discussion of the distinction between the cultivated and the wild offers some insights into the ambiguities of each category, especially