

Stranger in the Forest: On Foot Across Borneo

by Eric Hansen



ABOUT THE READING With few supplies, Eric Hansen walked through the rain forest of Borneo for seven months in 1982. Hansen hunted animals and gathered roots to survive. In this excerpt, he learns about the Penan, a people living in the rain forest.



As you read the passage think about how important the rain forest is to the people who have lived there for centuries.

We were led up the last few miles of river to the village of Long Seridan, beyond which lay the true Bornean jungle—a rain forest ecologically unchanged for millions of years.

I had learned that the Penan, small bands of **nomadic** hunters and gatherers, live in this damp, sunless world. Isolated from the coast by rapids and rough, broken country, these shy people have managed to retain their traditional lifestyle, thriving on the **abundance** of wild animals, sago flour, **edible** plants, fish, and jungle fruit. Living in a perfect **sympiotic** relationship with their environment, they carry few possessions and travel in groups of twenty-five to forty, changing camp every three to twelve weeks . . . these people are considered by all the inland tribes to be the true jungle experts . . .

We arrived . . . on a Sunday morning, and . . . I realized that I would have to hire guides to find the

VOCABULARY

nomadic a tribe or group of people who have no permanent home, but move about constantly in search of food

abundance a great supply

edible food that can be eaten

sympiotic two different organisms that depend on one another to live

What do you think the author means by the phrase “ecologically unchanged”?

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Penan. I soon discovered another problem: there were no guides available. The villagers practice swidden (slash-and-burn) agriculture, an intricate rice-growing technique that dominates nearly eight months of the year. The few villagers who knew the way to the highlands were busy making their *ladangs*, the dry rice fields that are cut from hilly secondary forest each year. I had arrived at one of the most critical periods of the rice cycle, just before the recently cut forest is burned. If the branches weren't dry enough or if the wind didn't blow in the right direction once the fire was lit or if the rains came early, the burn would be incomplete and all the previous effort would be wasted. No one could spare the time to come with me.

A "secondary forest" is a new growth of woody vegetation and young trees that springs up from land that was cleared of its original, or primary, forest.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Why is the author unable to find guides to take him to the Penan?

2. How does the Penan way of life described in this selection compare to life in the United States today?
