

# Understand Borneo

## **BORNEO TODAY** ..... 270

What Borneans are debating in cafes, discussing next to the water cooler and blogging about.

## **HISTORY** ..... 272

From Borneo's first humans to 21st-century headhunting, the island has a fascinating history.

## **PEOPLES & CULTURES** ..... 277

Borneo's indigenous groups are working hard, both to preserve age-old traditions and to engage fully with the modern world.

## **THE CUISINES OF BORNEO** ..... 285

Only in Borneo can you discover delicious Dayak dishes and slurp unique island versions of Chinese and Malay favourites.

## **NATURAL WORLD** ..... 290

Borneo's rainforests are home to thousands of endangered plants, animals and insects, but their habitats face serious environmental threats.

# Borneo Today

Nothing rankles with Borneans more than corrupt politicians who line their pockets at the expense of the public purse, the island's dwindling rainforests and indigenous land rights. Accounts of back-room deals with logging companies and palm-oil conglomerates provoke rage and despair in the people of Sabah, Sarawak and Kalimantan. Such tensions have yet to surface in Brunei, where the population calmly accepts both the sultan's supremacy and his oil-revenue-funded generosity.

## Best on Film

**Three Came Home** (1950) A tale of survival in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in WWII Borneo. Based on a book by Agnes Newton Keith.

**David Attenborough's Conquest of the Skies** (2015) Borneo plays a starring role in this remarkable three-part documentary series, including fascinating scenes in Gomantong Cave.

## Best in Print

**Stranger in the Forest** (Eric Hansen; 1988) Recounts the tale of the author's journey across Borneo on foot in the company of indigenous guides.

**The Casuarina Tree** (Somerset Maugham; 1926) A compilation of short stories including some set in British Borneo.

**Into the Heart of Borneo** (Redmond O'Hanlon; 1984) The funny and detailed account of O'Hanlon's trip upriver in Sarawak in the company of the poet James Fenton.

## Politics & Economics

In Kalimantan the policy of *transmigrasi*, the government-sponsored relocation of people from more densely populated areas of the country to Indonesian Borneo, has led to tensions between immigrants and the indigenous populations, but it is the struggle for resources that is the more prevalent issue affecting the island today. While Kalimantan's riches are plundered by foreign businesses in cahoots with the government, the local population enjoys little of the spoils.

Sabahans are well aware that while their state was Malaysia's second-richest in the 1970s, it is now the country's poorest. A major reason, they claim, is that all but a tiny percentage of Sabah's (and Sarawak's) oil revenue flows into federal coffers. The movement 'Sarawak for Sarawakians', a slogan that adorned car bumper stickers and T-shirts across the state following a rally of the same name in July 2015, was an expression of dissatisfaction with the current system and a demand for a more equitable return of state profits from the federal government; it was never intended to be a secessionist movement.

In August 2015, yellow-shirted supporters of Bersih 2.0 ([www.bersih.org](http://www.bersih.org)), a civil-rights organisation campaigning for electoral reform, held rallies in Kuching in Sarawak, Kota Kinabalu in Sabah and Kuala Lumpur in Peninsular Malaysia – the fourth such rally to be held since 2011. The protest was prompted by a corruption scandal embroiling Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak and the 1Malaysia fund (1MDB), as well as by state oppression of media outlets opposed to the government, including the blocking of news website the Sarawak Report ([www.sarawakreport.org](http://www.sarawakreport.org)) and the issuing of an arrest warrant for the London-based founder and editor Clare Rewcastle-Brown.