

Profiles



Brunei Darussalam

Tasek Merimbun

HERITAGE PARK

MUKIM RAMBAI, TUTONG DISTRICT, BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

Merimbun Heritage Park is a wildlife sanctuary, a conservation spot for flora and fauna, a recreational center, and a venue for research and education. It is the first to be declared a national park in Brunei Darussalam. The 7,800-hectare park was also declared an ASEAN Heritage Park on 29 November 1984, marking a significant era in its history. With this recognition, the government earmarked funds in the 6th National Development Plan for developing facilities at Tasek Merimbun to establish a national park that would incorporate extensive forest areas adjacent to the lake.

It is located about 32 km south of the Tutong-Kuala Belait coastal highway on the west bank of Sungai Tutong in Mukim Rambai, Tutong District. The park encloses catchments of small rivers feeding into the Tasek Merimbun Lakes, the largest black water body in the country that has two shallow lakes separated by a narrow channel. The water is black because the segment of the tributary that the locals call Sungai Meluncur flows through the peat

swamp forest. The western lake varies in surface area because a small river that connects with the Sungai Tutong drains it. The area however, has very poor drainage, causing the formation of several swamps and wetlands.

The black lakes including the fragile freshwater ponds, grass marshes and swamps are habitats rarely found in Borneo.

Much of the land within the park is flat, but the east side is undulating and hilly, with elevations ranging from 15 to 70 meters. Over 80% of the park has deep peat soil, sometimes overlain with a shallow soft gluey soil and alluvial soils; the eastern part is clayey or loamy.

Mixed dipterocarp is the main vegetation found in the park, especially to its south. *Combretocertus rotundatus* trees dominate the freshwater swamp forest around the two lakes and the Medit swamp, east of the park; a mixed peat swamp forest extends northeast of Sungai Tutong.

There is as yet no available list of plant species other than for trees, but one known

Photos courtesy of National Biodiversity Reference Unit (Brunei)

plant is native to Tasek Merimbun. Locally called purun, *Lepironia articulata* grows wild in abundance in the lake; its long stalk is so pliable, swaying so beautifully and creating natural patterns of movement, especially during low tide. It is one of the raw materials used by the Dusuns for their handicrafts. Because of its uniqueness, purun was selected for the park's logo; one of the park buildings - Balai Purun or Purun Hall - was even named after it.

The Brunei Museum staff has recorded over 70 bird species, including several water birds, and 17 species of freshwater fishes such as *Notopterus chitala*, *Chanda ranga* and *Rasbora sumatrana*. Among the 38 mammal species identified are cloud leopard, banded linsang, white-collared fruit bat, Bornean gibbon, Vordermann's flying squirrel and gray leaf monkey. Other fauna are still being studied.

Based on its surveys and studies, the Museum team drafted a preliminary park development programme. Then in 1986, the Negara Brunei Darussalam Master Plan Consultants produced the "Special Report on Wildlife and Conservation Management for Tasek Merimbun". They recommended, among other aspects, a revision of the park boundary, delineation of management zones to control visitor use, and the development of the park headquarters and other visitor use facilities in the vicinity of Kampong Merimbun.

The Ethno-linguistic Groups

Tutong District has a population of around 34,100 including Borneo's ethnic tribes: Tutong, Kedayan, Murut and Dusun. The park however is located in an area of low population density. However, over 580 people have settled close to the park's western, northern and eastern boundaries.

Tasek Merimbun is a traditional Dusun settlement. The Dusuns are known to have settled in the area 500 years ago. Local residents narrate that Imbun, a son of a Village Chief from Merangking, Belait District, discovered Merimbun while hunting for wild pigs; Imbun lost his way and reached this unfamiliar but beautiful lake. He became so fascinated with the view, the abundant fishes and bountiful jungle products that he decided to move and

settle there with his family and a few villagers. Thus, the name Tasek Merimbun. Another version relates that Merimbun may have been named after the remains of a ship (*tungkang*) that belonged to Eng Boon, a Chinese trader who had come to the place.

The Dusuns depended heavily on forest products, which provided them with food, water, traditional medicine as well as handicraft and building materials. Traditionally, they were hunters and gatherers of jungle products, as well as fishers and rice farmers. When they were introduced to the barter trade, they exchanged forest products such as rattan, damar, gahru (*Aquilaria* sp.) and sap of Jangkar and Jelutong trees (*Astonia* sp.) with kitchen utensils such as ceramic plates, brass rice pots; food supplements such as sugar and salt; cloth and cultural materials such as brass musical instruments, containers, and gold rings. They traded mainly with the Brunei Malay.

In the 1930s, the Dusuns were introduced to the cash economy. They started to rear poultry, buffalo and pigs; and plant rubber and fruit trees and vegetables, most of which they sold. A few years later, they reduced their dependence on the natural resources when they became employed in several enterprises.

How to get there

It takes about a half hour drive south west from Bandar along Brunei's coastal



highway to the Brunei-Muara District and into the gradually more rural landscapes of Tutong District, and towards its namesake town of Tutong.

Transport Services

Buses. Limited and infrequent services are available within the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, and to a few destinations outside the capital.

Car Rental. Rental for Toyota Corolla (1.3 liters) by Avis (tel. 673-2-426345; fax:673-2-422971) costs \$99/day, \$594/week and \$1050/month with additional insurance at \$15/day and personal accident insurance at \$6/day. Domestic companies such as Qawi (tel: 673-2-65550, fax: 673-2-655553) often have lower rates for the same model car: \$79/day, \$474/week, \$1000/month; collision and personal insurance are inclusive.

Museum vehicles. These are available to transport guests between destinations such as the airport, Brunei Museum, Government Rest house, Merimbun Heritage Park, and shopping complexes.

Taxi service. Taxis do not cruise the streets but wait at the bus terminal close to the Government Rest House, or can be summoned by telephone (222214 between 0600-1900) for metered journeys within the capital, BSB. Be warned that taxi drivers charge additional fees for services at night. Most drivers do not speak English so ask Rest House staff to help.

Climate and Clothing

The park has a hot and humid climate, although rains sometimes occur in the morning. Visitors are advised to wear loose and light cotton clothing and to bring sun block lotion and a wide brim straw hat (locally available) as protection from the tropical sun.

What to see and do

Tasek Merimbun is a great destination for picnics. Fridays, Saturdays and especially Sundays are usually crowded so those who want to avoid the weekend crowd may come on other days. Visiting researchers have separate facilities, but visitors may wander by in their area.

There is no television, video machine, or radio at the guesthouse. Aside from the local radio station, two pop music radio stations of London are retransmitted to Brunei at 94.4 FM (Capital Radio: Top 10), and at 100.4 FM (Capital Gold: oldest).

In the Dusun house (described below), visitors could learn traditional crafts such as weaving mats and baskets from pandan (*Pandanus* sp.) leaves and making fish traps.

More importantly, one should always visit the **Special Exhibition** area, which houses both the Natural History and Archaeological sections, as described below:

Biodiversity Value. The Natural History Section of the Museum Department shows a collection of the park's rich biodiversity. A joint fieldwork by the Museum Department, Universiti of Brunei Darussalam and the Biology Department of the National University of Singapore has recorded about 47 species of freshwater fish. The findings are partly alarming because the survey documented the presence of the Kissing Gourami, an exotic species known to be aggressive and therefore a threat to the native species.

The Museum staff has also collected 111 specimens of plants and trees, and some 14 sting bees breeding in the park; it is usual to find four insect species nesting in one tree.

Over 40 morphospecies of beautiful and colorful dragonflies and damselflies from the park's aquatic habitats are shown in the museum. Their larval stages are aquatic and the varied species are interesting examples of how aquatic organisms live in a black water environment.

Historic Value. Although archaeological research at the park began only in 1988, the studies have unearthed rich archeological remains such as Chinese and European ceramic, bronze and brass wares. Based on their findings, the researchers made the following assumptions:

- Tasek Merimbun is among the earliest settlements in the interior of Tutong District. Chinese ceramics collected at several sites within the Park such as at Pulau Labi-Labi and Pulau Jelundong,

date to as early as the 15th century of the Ming dynasty. Common Chinese ceramic shards found at the sites include blue-and-white and white wares, celadon types and stoneware.

- The earliest inhabitants were pagan. Two types of burial practices have been discovered: jar and coffin burials. The Jar burial site at Pulau Jelundong, a small island west of Tasek Merimbun, is one of the earliest burial sites and among the oldest burial practices, perhaps dating to the 15th to the late 19th centuries. The Borneo tribes normally practise jar burial, also known as secondary burial. It is the final rite after the first burial step has been completed. This is the decomposing of the dead body. Skeletons from the decomposed body are then removed and put inside a jar and buried as a final process. The remains of the dead are normally buried together with other goods such as ceramics, bronze and brass objects.

The coffin burial site located at Nung Gunang, east of Tasek Merimbun is dated early 20th century. The burial practice is similar to the Islamic one. The dead is buried in the ground (*liang lahad*). The grave is sheltered and accompanied by burial goods such as export ceramics, bronze and brass materials and coins. The cemetery is still in use since a large majority of Dusun animists continue to bury their dead there.

- The unearthed ceramics and Brunei's Malay traditional bronze and brass objects suggest the existence of a barter trade between Tasek Merimbun and the coastal communities, in particular the Tutong and Brunei Malays. As mentioned earlier, Eng Boon, a Chinese merchant, brought merchandise to be exchanged with local products. Tasek Merimbun directly links with the outside regions through its inland river systems such as Sungai Merimbun, Sungai Rambai and Sunagi Tutong; the latter directly flows into the South China Sea.



- Tasek Merimbun was once inhabited. The locals were using the ecosystem as their means to obtain their daily needs and requirements. The lakes and rivers systems were used for fishing and washing. The locals obtain food, medicines and materials for buildings and handicraft from the forests. This tradition continues to this day, but on a smaller scale.
- The locals used the small islands around Tasek Merimbun as temporary shelter against the invading Iban and Kayan tribes. These tribal fights (*ayau*) occurred in the 18th to late 19th centuries. Pulau Labi-Lab was one of the islands used as an observation post to spot approaching enemies.
- Ceramics and housing poles are among the archaeological artifacts found on the island.

Facilities

Exhibition Hall. This spacious building is perched atop a hill to provide visitors with a spectacular and panoramic view of the lake environment. Large folding doors open onto a wrap-around veranda where one can simply enjoy the sweeping and impressive scenery that provides a tranquil feeling. One can also use long-range binoculars to observe some plants and animals.

Aquarium tanks displaying the fishes and plants in Tasek Merimbun and associated

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waterways demonstrate the species richness of freshwater fishes.

The administrative office and workshop are housed in the building to serve as coordinating body between the park staff and the public.

Dusun House. Located close to the Exhibition Hall, this sturdy, traditional house is a two-family structure built entirely with materials from the forest, and without any nails. Over 42 species of forest products were collected and used as supports, walls, thatches and ties. It is intended to evoke the traditional lifestyle of the Dusuns, specially their handicraft skills. Various traditional crops have been planted around the house. Kitchen gardens that provide daily cooking stuff can be seen at the back of the house. Handicrafts and forest fruit seedlings are also sold. Illustrated booklets that provide an explanation of the plants used, names for the parts of the house, and furnishings are available. Visitors and researchers may stay at this house.

Villagers who helped build the house sometimes spend time during the weekends to provide information to visitors about the house and its contents.

Nature Trail. The trail is accessible from several points along the peninsular land that includes the Park Headquarter's area. Trail markers have been placed at intervals of 100 meters so visitors can determine their whereabouts at all times. Shelters evenly spaced along the trail afford protection from rain and encourage visitors to prolong their stay in natural surroundings. An illustrated booklet is available for those who want to take a self-guided tour.

Forest Camp Sites. There are three forest campsites: two along Sungai Meluncur and one at Sungai Merimbun. Each has separate shelters for sleeping, working and cooking. A full complement of camping equipment is available for use by visiting researchers.

Lakeside Gazebos. Shelters have been constructed along the trail leading from the Multi-Purpose Hall going to Kampong Merimbun. This trail, which is shorter and goes through woodland that has an open

and well-manicured understorey, is excellent for families with small children.

Environment-friendly boat rides. Row boats provide a healthy recreational activity for visitors who would like to paddle in the lake close to park headquarters. Boats powered by electric motors would be the only viable transport to take visitors for further scenic rides in the eastern lobe of the lake, and along the rivers. Besides not polluting the aquatic environment, the electric motors provide a quiet ride, enabling passengers to hear the sounds of nature. Being slow movers, these boats will not disturb the aquatic vegetation much.

Laboratory building. The Laboratory is air-conditioned and divided into wet and dry areas. It has a separate office for researchers to process data. The back porch provides a large open space for outdoor activities.

Guest Researchers' Quarters. This building has four double bedrooms for a maximum of eight persons, two bathrooms, a large living room, a dining and cooking area, and laundry facilities. Each bedroom has ample storage space to organise personal belongings for a long visit, and a wide, covered veranda.

Multi-purpose Hall. Known as "Balai Purun", this building is intended for varied uses. One can view the natural beauty from the spacious veranda around the building.

Surau. Surau (prayer room) is provided near the car park area.

Rules and Regulations

The Park is managed by the Brunei Museum Department, which is now updating its services in line with the concept of "Museums Enterprises." Below are some of the rules and regulations and fees with regard to use of the park and its facilities:

Reservation of rooms/campsites/ multi-purpose hall

- Reservations should be made in writing to the Director of Museums at least two weeks prior to usage or arrival.
- Payment should be made at the Finance Section of the Museum Department.
- Reservation is on a first come first served basis.



Registration

- All guests are required to register/fill in the register form on arrival.
- Guests are required to show payment receipt upon checking in.
- Those exempted from payment should show an approved letter.

Use of rooms

- Only registered guests are allowed to enter the premises.
- No pets are allowed.
- No cooking in the bedrooms.
- No smoking in the buildings.

Reminders: Brunei Darussalam is a Muslim country and only halal foods and drinks should be consumed in its facilities; pork and pork products as well as alcoholic beverages should be avoided.

Fees / Charges

- Multi-purpose Hall
B\$100.00 per day
- Researchers' quarters:
Single occupancy B\$25.00 per day
Double occupancy B\$30.00 per day

Where to stay

The Researchers' Quarters within the complex is the only lodging place in the Park. But 25 km away, in Tutong Town, Tutong District, one could check out the following:

- Government Real House, which is managed by Tutong District Office (673-4-222491)
- Halim Plaza Hotel (Tel.: 673-4-26-688, Fax: 673-4.26-170)
- Ser Aman Complex (Fax: 673-4-222668)

Where to eat

There is no restaurant within the Park but there are many small Indian and Malay restaurants in the nearby villages at Lamunin, Pat Nunok, Kiudang, Pangkalan Mau, or way out into Tutong Town such as Sungai Basong Recreational Park, and Ser Kenangan Beach. ■

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