

Defining conservation priorities in tropical and biodiversity rich countries

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Malayan.tapir.with.baby. Credit: Courtesy of Jon Moore (Tropical Ecology Assessment and Monitoring Network/University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus).

Rich in biodiversity, with a rapidly growing economy, Malaysia exemplifies the tension between conservation and economic development faced by many tropical countries.

While recent initiatives have attempted to address [conservation](#) priorities at global and national scales, most of these focus on developed countries in temperate regions. There is a need, say experts at The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC), to develop similar strategies in developing countries, especially in biodiversity hotspot areas.

K. Nagulendran (Nagu), a third year PhD student with the School of Geographical and Environmental Sciences, led a multi-stakeholder exercise involving several hundred participants to identify conservation priorities in Peninsular Malaysia. They have produced a list of 35 ranked conservation issues within seven general themes. The aim is to influence policy-makers, practitioners and researchers and ensure conservation becomes an integral part of the development process. The results – 'A multi-stakeholder strategy to identify conservation priorities in Peninsular Malaysia' - have been published in the [open access](#) academic journal *Cogent Environmental Science*.

The project makes the case for the prioritisation of conservation actions in Peninsular Malaysia guided by science, in consultation with a wide range of key stakeholders. It is also important to focus collective action given the limited resources available for conservation activities.

Protecting Malaysia's wealth of biodiversity

Malaysia is part of the Sundaland Biodiversity Hotspot and is ranked 12 globally in terms of its National Biodiversity Index. Malaysia boasts a wealth of biodiversity which includes 306 species of mammals, 742 species of birds, 567 species of reptiles and over 15,000 plant species. Although the country has a target to increase terrestrial protected areas

from 13.8% of total land area in 2015 to 20% by 2025, [economic development](#) has already had an impact on wildlife. The Sumatran rhino has disappeared altogether and the country has seen a steady decline in the number of Malayan tigers.

Through a series of workshops and online surveys, the objective of the research was to engage relevant stakeholders in the identification of conservation priority issues in Peninsular Malaysia; produce a list of ranked conservation issues; and test differences in priority perception among the stakeholders involved in the exercise.

The results suggest that there should be: improvements to policy and management to champion biodiversity issues; a strengthening of environmental laws and enforcement; recognition of socio-economic issues especially among indigenous and local communities; increases in funding and resource allocation; knowledge, research and development to inform decision making; a greater understanding and protection of the rights of nature and cultural heritage; a more holistic public awareness and participation to bring about change to promote conservation.

Balancing the need for economic development

Nagu works for the Malaysian Government's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. He graduated with a Masters in Environmental Management from The University of Nottingham in 2003 and has been recognised by the University for his work in the evolution of Malaysia's policies on the environment and natural resource management.

He said: "The country faces important trade-offs in its aim to conserve biodiversity while balancing the need for economic development. The project allowed us to effectively engage a broad spectrum of stakeholders – including those in powerful and influential positions. We

hope this exercise can be used as a blue print for conservation priorities and policies in Malaysia and other tropical countries. By making this paper open access, it can be available to all. All of us need to understand that we can make a change and choose a lifestyle that is more harmonious with nature."

Malaysia is generally considered an example of success in its smooth transition into modern economy with an ambition to be a high income economy by 2020. Malaysians below the poverty line has been drastically reduced from 52% in 1957 (at independence) to less than 0.6% in 2014. This rapid economic development, however, has come with a cost to the environment. In 1940 almost 80% of Peninsular Malaysia was under forest cover – this figure had dropped to 44% by 2014.

While the world is losing biodiversity at unprecedented rate, the first objective of the Convention on Biological Diversity adopted in 1992 is to conserve the earth's biodiversity. The Aichi Biodiversity Targets renewed this mandate to address and halt [biodiversity](#) loss by 2020. Prioritisation of conservation approaches by identification of issues will assist developing countries with limited resources for conservation in supporting the achievements of Aichi Targets as illustrated in this paper.

The senior authors of the study are Dr Campos-Arceiz, associate professor in Tropical Conservation Ecology at UNMC, and Dr Rory Padfield, lecturer in Geography at Oxford Brookes University. Dr Campos-Arceiz said: "To generate ownership of the issues and potential solutions there is a need for inclusiveness and multi-stakeholder participation in the identification of conservation priorities. Although we will have contrasting perceptions of conservation priorities, it is important to have multi-stakeholder support and involvement to pursue our conservation agenda."

More information: A multi-stakeholder strategy to identify conservation priorities in Peninsular Malaysia, K. Nagulendran et al. *Cogent Environmental Science*, Volume 2, 2016 - Issue 1 Article: 1254078 | Received 17 Aug 2016, Accepted 25 Oct 2016, Accepted author version posted online: 31 Oct 2016, Published online: 21 Nov 2016, [www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10 ... 3311843.2016.1254078](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23744241.2016.1254078)

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