

## WALKING THE TRAILS OF TAMAN NEGARA: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE FOOTPATH OF THE INDIGENOUS BATEK

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### Abstract

Orang Asli (aboriginal people) in Malaysia are seen as marginalised, poor and without any proper education, and the Batek *Hep* of Taman Negara is not an exception. The Batek *Hep* is one of the eighteen tribes of aboriginal people of Malaysia and is from the Negrito subgroup. They are hunter-gatherers and foragers of forest produce. Batek is also considered an egalitarian society and dwells mostly along the main river in Taman Negara, Pahang as well as its tributaries. The paper intends to look at the changes that have taken place in the Batek society over the decade. The study is located in Taman Negara Pahang, and the focus is on education and culture. This paper uses the qualitative approach, and the data are taken from field observation notes, video recordings, semi-structured and informal interviews, as well as document analysis from previous research. The data collection period was from 2011- 2021, with visits to eight villages located in Taman Negara. Field observation notes and video recordings were taken during visits to the villages, and the interviews were conducted with the heads of villages, an adult woman, and young males. Over the ten years (2011-2021), it was found that the approach to education among the Batek has slowly changed, modernisation has influenced the younger generation but not the elders, the semi-nomadic lifestyle has changed, but the cultural values have been preserved. The paper ends with suggestions for the future direction of Batek *Hep* to elevate themselves from its current economic situation.

**Keywords:** *Batek Orang Asli, Taman Negara, education, cultural values*

## INTRODUCTION

The Batek tribe, an indigenous group residing in Peninsular Malaysia, has been the subject of various research endeavours to understand their unique characteristics, challenges, and interactions with the environment. Studies have been done by local and international scholars alike and have started since the early 1900s, but significant research on the Batek started in the 1970s through the seminal works of Kirk Endicott (1979, 1984, 1988). Endicott's works are mainly on the anthropological aspects of the Batek lives, and his other research ranges from the economy, hunting methods, power, and conflicts to religion, child-rearing, and mortality. Most of Endicott's works centred mainly on the Batek De' in Kelantan. Batek in Taman Negara has also been the subject of research for local and international scholars, and the focus has been on their interaction with nature, ecotourism, knowledge of the forest and language (see, e.g., Lye, 2000, 2002, 2005, Ahmad et al. 2011, Endicott et al. 2016, Rudge, 2014). Other studies have delved into the health risks faced by the Batek tribe, revealing intriguing findings such as high prevalence rates of hypertension despite their lean physique and remote lifestyle (Phipps et al., 2015), explored the reproductive success and social dynamics within the Batek community, indicating that foraging performance and prosocial behaviour do not necessarily predict lifetime reproductive success among Batek hunter-gatherers (Kraft et al., 2018) and empower the Batek through strategies involving cultural ecological tourism, aiming to generate income and job opportunities for these communities (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Moreover, investigations into the health status of the Batek tribe have uncovered valuable insights, such as the assessment of *Helicobacter pylori* colonisation and the prevalence of infectious diseases among remote Orang Asli tribes in Peninsula Malaysia, including the Batek (Thevakumar et al., 2016), Ethnomedical surveys have also been conducted to document the traditional knowledge of medicinal plant usage among the Batek tribe, highlighting the importance of local plants in treating various illnesses within the community (Samuel et al., 2010) and also studies have explored the genetic signatures and evolutionary adaptations of the Batek tribe, shedding light on their unique genetic makeup and historical lineage (NurWaliyuddin et al., 2015). The multifaceted studies on the Batek tribe underscore the importance of recognising and supporting the unique identities and needs of indigenous populations in Malaysia.

The Batek tribe is one of the eighteen tribes of aboriginal people of Malaysia and is from the Negrito subgroup. The number of Batek in the country is small and spread across various locations in Pahang, Kelantan, and Terengganu (refer to Table 1). Lye (2005) describes them as "lowland forest people and among

the last of the mobile hunter-gatherer societies in the Peninsula” (Lye, 2005, p. 251). Among the Batek, there are various subgroups, and the Batek in the Taman Negara Pahang is known as Batek *Hep* where *hep* means forest (Lye, 2000, 2005). There are also Batek located in other parts of Pahang, in the state of Kelantan and Terengganu, and they are referred to as Batek De’, Batek Nong and Batek Tanum (Endicott, 1979, 1984, Lye, 2000, Tacey & Riboli, 2014). The differences are not physical but more on the linguistic aspect of their language as well as cultural identities (Tacey & Riboli, 2014).

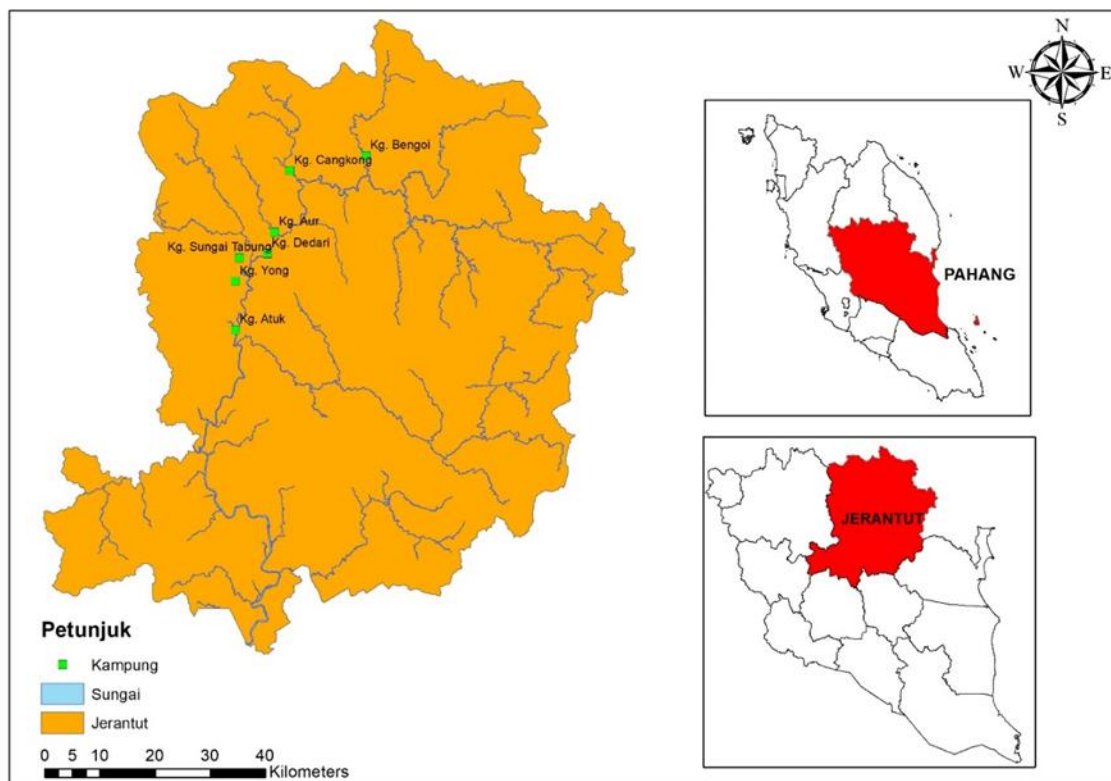
**Table 1: Distribution of the Batek tribe in Malaysia**

Tribe	Locality	Population
Batek	<i>Kelantan, Pahang, Terengganu</i>	1451

Source: Department of Statistics (2016).

The Batek is an egalitarian society where individual and group autonomy are valued. It is led by a headman of the village, who has no authority within the group but is merely a representative appointed by the government (Endicott et al. 2016). Although the Batek are considered a semi-nomadic tribe, the villages along the Tembeling River in Taman Negara have existed for more than a decade. The Batek has become semi-permanent, so they no longer move from one location to another in search of food or games. However, they may move from the main village into temporary camps in the forest (Endicott et al., 2016) or move from one big settlement to another (Rudge, 2021). From 2011 until recently, these eight villages have existed, and some have been expanded to cater to the growing families. The Batek sets up one or two new villages. The village in Sungai Tabung is a relatively new village that consists of three to four families and has around ten huts or *hayaq*. The village headman, R4, informed us that he wanted to build a new settlement for his family and decided to set up the village. It consisted of his family, his father, and his siblings. The village has become a *show village*, where tourists would come for a visit to watch blow piping demonstrations and fire-making skills: another village, Kg. Cangkung was set up in 2012 with a small *hayaq* and less than five families. However, in 2021, the village expanded, consisting of more than ten *hayaq*, and a small hall. Kg Bengol is also a relatively new village from 2018 to 2019. It is located on the banks of Sat River in Kuala Sat on the periphery of the Taman Negara and was not there from 2011-2013. Their previous village was further inland from the mouth of the Sat River. The village was set up with the help of the local Malays of Kuala Sat as part of the plan for ecotourism for the surrounding committee. The village is also one of the *show villages* for local and

international tourists. It is one of the efforts of the local community to provide sustainable income for the Batek. The location of the Batek villages can be seen in the map below. The map is a snapshot of Kuala Tahan, the main town in Taman Negara, Malaysia, and its surrounding areas. However, the locations of the villages are approximate and not exact.



**Figure 1: Locations of Batek Villages in Taman Negara, Malaysia**

(source: Researchers' Personal Map)

The Batek do not have any permanent employment and live on the substances that they can gather from the forest. Previous research (Endicott, 1979; Faulstich, 1985; Lye, 2002; Endicott et al., 2016) indicated that the primary diet of the Batek consisted of tubers, leaves shoots, and wild fruits found in the forest and small animals like monkeys that they hunted. The Batek would only hunt those animals found in the trees, not hunt or kill wild boar or any animals on land. According to them, the animals above ground are 'cleaner' for consumption. Endicott (1979) described in detail the hunting methods of the Batek but was unsure why they would not hunt larger animals. He concluded that it was

probably due to the danger these animals would cause to the hunters and the lack of more lethal hunting equipment. However, their diet has expanded from yam and wild fruits to rice, spices, condiments, and canned food (Faulstich, 1985). For the children, they have been exposed to snacks bought from the local grocery stores.

The Batek men still forage in the jungle for forest produce such as *rattan* or *agar* wood, yam, and wild fruits. They would also do labour work for local businessmen or villagers, including cleaning up land or collecting wood (Lye, 2002). However, these jobs are often seasonal and do not provide them with sustainable income. A few of the Batek men work as park rangers for the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) in Taman Negara Pahang. A few selected men from the villages were appointed temporary park rangers as part of an effort by the government to provide sustainable income for the Batek. The women folk would work on bangles and other small handicrafts made from *rattan* to be sold to tourists, but the income was often insufficient. Batek men are also excellent tree climbers (Endicott, 1979, 2008, Brill, 2020) and are often engaged by local traders to climb *petai* or bitter bean (*parkia speciosa*) trees and collect honey.

**Table 2: Batek’s Work and Diet**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Hunt/Forage</b>	<b>Work</b>	<b>Diet</b>
In the past *Based on the literature	<i>Small game such as monkeys</i> <i>Wild tubers, fruits, leaves, shoots, honey</i>	<i>Day labouring</i> <i>Tourist guide</i> <i>Collection and trade of forest produce (fruits, honey)</i>	<i>Wild tubers, fruits, leaves, shoots</i> <i>Rice, sugar, tobacco, tea</i> <i>Canned food</i>
2011-2013	<i>Small game such as monkeys</i> <i>Wild tubers, fruits, leaves, shoots, honey</i>	<i>Day labouring</i> <i>Tourist guides/Demonstrators at show villagers</i> <i>Collection and trade of forest produce (fruits, honey)</i>	<i>Wild tubers, fruits, leaves, shoots</i> <i>Rice, sugar, tobacco, and tea</i> <i>Canned food</i>
2017-2021	<i>Small game such as monkeys</i> <i>Wild tubers, fruits, leaves, shoots, honey</i>	<i>Day labouring</i> <i>Tourist guides/ Demonstrators at show villagers</i> <i>Collection and trade of forest produce</i>	<i>Wild tubers, fruits, leaves, shoots</i> <i>Rice, sugar, tobacco, and tea</i> <i>Canned food</i>

		Contractual Park Rangers appointed by the DNWP	
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Source: Lye (2005).

Based on Table 2 above, there seems to be very little change in their activities or diet over the years, except for being appointed as Park Rangers by the DNWP, a program that started in 2019. The Batek continue to consume nature’s produce but simultaneously indulge in products such as tobacco, sugar, coffee, and tea. The children would get their snacks from grocery stores or the night market when they have the chance. The Batek continue to forage and hunt in Taman Negara and trade the resources they gather with the locals, and this has been the same for the past decade. The Batek are allowed to travel, forage, and hunt within Taman Negara freely (Lye, 2000). It can be concluded that the Batek have managed to retain this aspect of their lifestyle even though they are being assimilated into the modern way of living.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the Batek tribe started in the 1970s, with works from Endicott serving as the foundation for further works. Endicott (1979) conducted a study on the hunting methods of the Batek De’ in Kelantan and provided detailed descriptions of their hunting style and the type of game they preferred. The Batek would use blowpipes with poisoned darts made of sap from the Ipuh tree (*antiaris toxicaria*) more than fifty percent of the time. Another hunting method was what Endicott described as the ‘getting animals out of the hole’ method, where the small animals are cornered and clubbed using the blunt edge of the knives or the digging stick. According to Endicott, a reasonably larger animal (mature monkey) would be shared with the village members. The Batek do not hunt larger animals such as pigs or deer. Endicott (1979) postulated that there could be various reasons for the Batek to indulge themselves in hunting bigger animals, including danger to the hunting party and lack of proper planning as hunting large game requires complex planning. They certainly have ample materials for big game hunting, but perhaps, according to Endicott (1979), their semi-nomadic lifestyle, where they move from one camp to another regularly, does not allow them ample time to plan for it properly. The Batek still employ similar hunting methods, and the skills are being taught to the young.

Endicott (1988) discussed the issue of property, power and conflict in a study on the Batek De’ in Kelantan. He found that the Batek has no exclusivity on the ownership of the land and that only Batek *hala’* (superhuman beings) can own

the land. As such, any unharvested forest produce will be shared among the people, and the location of such produce will be disclosed to the others. There is no individual ownership of such produce. Similarly, Endicott (1988) stated that any food that they have will be shared, and it is an obligation that they must adhere to (Endicott, 1988), first with the conjugal family and then with the extended family. It will then be shared with the group if there is more than what they need. The Batek is a generally peaceful society that “abhors interpersonal violence and generally fled from the enemies rather than fighting back” (Endicott, 1988, p. 122). Each family has autonomy over their own, and the camp would normally have “natural leaders, who are usually older people of either sex who are respected for their intelligence, experience and good judgement” (Endicott, 1988, p. 122).

Faulstich (1985) studied the Batek of Taman Negara and their relocation to a new settlement, Kuala Atok. The relocation program was an initiative by the government to provide the Batek with a much more permanent settlement and an agricultural community. It was also a way to prevent the Batek from roaming the jungle for fear of being in contact with the communist guerilla in Taman Negara. In addition, the settlement is outside the boundary of Taman Negara, the ancestral home of the Batek. However, the Batek people disapproved of this move as it contrasted with their semi-nomadic lifestyle. The idea of turning them into an agricultural community did not go down well with their natural behaviour. The Batek prefer day labouring, where the monetary return is rather immediate, than agricultural work, where the return is long-term. The settlement was abandoned shortly after it was established, and the Batek moved to a settlement closer to Kuala Tahan (currently Kg Sungai Yong), where day labouring was much easier to obtain. Faulstich concluded that drastic changes would be needed if the Batek became subsistence farmers. Their preference for semi-nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyles showed that any changes made to them must be in accordance with their culture. The current settlement of Kg Kuala Atok lies across the Tembeling River, opposite the old settlement set up by the government.

Lye (2002) studied the importance of forest landscapes to their knowledge and continuity. Lye argued that the pathways or trails in the jungle are more than simply the track they thread upon. They are trails that develop environmental and social knowledge, allowing the Batek to remember the meaning of the forest, keep in touch with their history and learn about the new world. The relationship with the forest is important to the Batek because they believe they are the forest's guardians (Lye, 2005). Lye (2005) argued that Batek's concept of conservation is different from the rest and stated that the Batek would only cut old trees if they were to fall on their huts, and if they could not do so, they would remove the hut. In addition, the Batek would only cut down vines or branches on the trail if it is

impossible to walk through and then let the vegetation close behind them (Lye, 2005). Lye's work (2000,2002, 2005) mainly focused on the significance of the forest to the Batek and how it helps in their cultural continuity.

Research on the beliefs of the Batek were also conducted. Tracey (2013) studied the Batek's religious world and how modernisation's emergence and influence have shaped their views of the world. Tacey (2013) noted that.

Ongoing processes such as the destruction of forests and their conversion to plantations; rapidly increasing flows of global objects, images, people, and capital; social, political and economic marginalisation; deterritorialisation; forced relocation; sedentism and Islamization have all had profound effects on Batek religion. (Tacey, 2013, p. 244)

Tacey discussed the impact of globalisation on the Batek as he found that the changing landscapes of the Batek surroundings has created what he described as *tropes of fear* (Tacey, 2013 p. 247). Batek views the forest as the source for everything, and any changes to the forest may invoke the fear of the superhuman beings. He also mentioned the blood rituals of pleasing the *Gobar* and *Naga* (*superhuman beings*), whom the Batek believe to be their guardians . Fatanah et al. (2012) also conducted a similar study focusing on the Batek's manifestation of the forest and discussed the *Lawad*, *Ye' Yo' and Tum Yap* in their belief systems. Batek considered the forest as their world, and it provides them with "living quarter, subsistence source of living, spiritual realm, and as an ancestral legacy" (Fatanah et al., 2012 p. 194), and any disruptions or destructions to it would invoke catastrophe. They believe that they are the guardians of the forest. *Lawad* (prohibitions, taboos) is the most important element of the Batek culture and *Ye' Yo'* is the negative attitude towards any living things, plants, or animals and is considered the worst form of *Lawad* (Fatanah et al., 2012). As such, any *Ye'Yo'* done on any living things might invoke the anger *Hala'* (superhuman beings), and to appease them, the Batek would perform *Tum Yap* or blood sacrifice, a ceremonial "throwing of the blood taken from the shin and mixed it with rainwater or river water to the sky" (Needham, 1964, cited in Fatanah et al., 2012). Fatanah et al. (2012) concluded that the Batek believe that the forest is their ancestral home, which they need to defend to appease the superhuman beings. The relationship between the Batek and the forest cannot be severed.

Ahmad et al. (2011) conducted a linguistic study on Batek's lexicon and loan words. The study was conducted with the Batek in Taman Negara, and the involvement was in describing the lexicons for time, water, dwellings, and loaned words. The study found that certain Malay words have influenced the use of



certain lexicons in Bateks' vocabulary. Various research was conducted on the role of Batek and ecotourism in Taman Negara. According to Lye (2004, cited in Endicott et al., 2016), Batek has played a significant role in developing ecotourism in Taman Negara, and its contribution can be seen as early as the 1950s. Endicott et al.'s (2016) study focused on the involvement of the Batek tribe in ecotourism and its impact on them. The Batek, at the time of Endicott's study, became a mainstay of ecotourism in Taman Negara. The study found that being "Batek" for the tourists allows the Batek to maintain their cultural originality without sacrificing the potential of sustainable income through blow piping demonstrations and selling handicrafts. Fan et al. (2020) conducted a study on the involvement of the Batek in ecotourism in Taman Negara. They found that the Batek have mixed perceptions of the industry. Their informants mentioned that their income helped them buy food and other necessities, but the influx of tourists into their camps has resulted in them losing much privacy. Fan et al. (2020) concluded that the Batek welcome tourism as it provides them with income, but they believe that they should be allowed to grow with modernity while still living authentically as a Batek. Both Endicott et al. (2016) and Fan et al. (2020) discussed similar ideas of 'Batek playing Batek' for the tourism industry.

Abdullah et al. (2023) conducted a study on the influence of chaperones on the Batek children's schooling experience. Their study found that the Batek children and the parents were rather sceptical about the idea of schooling, and the idea was met with slight apprehension. However, the presence of the chaperon, who is an elder from the village helps to smoothen the transition into the routine of going to school. The Batek children's attendance has been consistent, and the children have adapted well to school life. The study showed that the Batek children are capable of going to school regularly, albeit with the presence of a chaperone.

The research on the Batek tribe of Taman Negara focused on their relationship with the forest, lifestyle, plight to save the forest, involvement with ecotourism and their language. However, limited research has been done on the education of the Batek children, and this could be an area that could be further investigated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study aims to identify the changes among the Batek of Taman Negara over the duration of ten years (2011-2021). The focus of this study is on the areas of education and culture. This is a qualitative study, and the data are taken from field observation notes, video recordings, semi-structured and informal interviews, and document analysis from previous research. The study is located in Taman Negara

Pahang, and the data collection period was from 2011 to 2021, with visits to all the Batek villages located in Taman Negara. Field observation notes and video recordings were taken during visits to the villages. The interviews were conducted with the heads of villages, adult women and young males and the headmaster of the local primary school. The villages are listed below, and the informants are from the respective villages.

**Table 3: Batek villages and informants**

<b>Name of village</b>	<b>Informant</b>	<b>Existence before 2017</b>	<b>Description of informant</b>
<p>Kg Tersek: This is the closest village to the main town in Kuala Tahan, about 2km of rugged off-road track. There are about 10 huts in the village.</p>	R5	Yes	She is an elder of the village and in her mid-fifties. Her son goes to the school in Kuala Tahan, and she is the chaperon for her village. Kg Tersek is the closest to Kuala Tahan town and was once the show village for the tourist (before 2014)
<p>Kg Sungai Tabung: This village is only accessible by boat, and there are about 10 huts.</p>	R4	No	He is the head of the village and was the one who set up the village as a new home for his family. He is in his mid-thirties. Currently (2021), his village is used as the show village.
<p>Kg Dedari: This village is accessible by boat and land transport and about 10km from the main town of Kuala Tahan. There are more than 15 huts in the village. This is one of the bigger Batek villages in Taman Negara. This</p>	R3	Yes	He is the head of the village and a quite prominent spokesperson for the Batek in Taman Negara. R4 is in his mid-fifties.

<p>village is also one of the show villages, but tourists visit it less frequently as they have shifted to Kg Sungai Tabung.</p>			
<p>Kg Cangkung: This village lies in one of the main Kuala Tembeling River tributaries and is only accessible by boat. This village is about forty minutes by boat from the nearest Malay village/town. There are about 10 huts in the village.</p>	R2	Yes	<p>He is a young father of three and works with the Department of Wildlife and National Park as a ranger. He is in his early forties.</p>
<p>Kg Bengoi: This village lies east of Taman Negara's perimeter and is very near to a Malay village. However, it is only accessible by boat, but it takes only ten minutes to get to the nearest Malay village in Kuala Sat and a local primary school there.</p>	R1	No	<p>He is an elder from the village and is responsible for taking the children to school. He is their chaperon. He is in his late fifties.</p>

The semi-structured and informal interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia (the national language), and the informants are rather fluent in the language as it is the medium of communication with the local community, albeit with a local accent. The data from the interviews were later transcribed. The observations' notes were taken during the visits, and the researchers were

nonparticipants in the observations. In order to overcome bias in the analysis of the findings, data collected were triangulated to ensure that the findings from the methods used (interviews, video recordings, observations) were in accordance with the set themes (education and culture).

The informants were selected based on their ability to communicate in the national language, their involvement in the Batek children's education, and their involvement in their respective villages' activities and development. Another representative is the headmaster of the local primary school, who is in his early fifties. The school is the only primary school in Kuala Tahan town, which is the location of the study.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Education***

Education for the Orang Asli has been a well-researched issue, and the focus has been on the problems that they face. These include geographical locations and transportation, retention in school, poor economic conditions, and parental involvement (Abdullah & Primus, 2021; Wong & Abdillah, 2018). The Batek in Taman Negara is no exception, as the children do not attend school as often as required. A study by Yunus et al. (2014) identified that no Batek children went to school during the study, and they learned informally from the local villagers. Most of the Batek villages are only accessible by boat, and only recently (2016) has there been road access to two of the eight villages (Kg Tersek and Kg Dedari). Batek children attended school in the past, but it only lasted briefly. Despite the efforts from the government, which included transportation, school uniforms and stationery, the retention of Batek children in school was poor. Nurul Fatanah Kamarul Zahari et al. (2018) stated that accessibility, school calendar, and literacy gap are the main obstacles for the Batek children. The Batek parents did not show any effort to bring the children to school, perhaps due to their unawareness of the importance of education. According to R3, there were no boats or fuel for the boats to take the children to school. This has been the main excuse given during this period. Since there was no road access to these villages, river transport was the only way, and this has proven to be costly due to the distance from the village to the school. As such, limited transport services have been used as an excuse for the Batek to be absent from school. In addition, in an interview, the headman of one of the villages iterated that the Batek would prefer to live a peaceful life of hunting and gathering (Bonta, 2016).

However, in the past few years (2017-2021), the Batek have attended schools more regularly. The government has provided better transportation services for the school going Batek children living close to Kuala Tahan, the main

town in Taman Negara. The villages involved include Kg Tersek, Kg Dedari, and Kg Sungai Tabung. R3's village, Kg Dedari, has road access now, and the children from the village would attend school using the transportation provided by the government. The perception of the parents has also changed, and in an interview with a local newspaper, a few of the parents mentioned that the time has come for the children to learn and help develop their community (Bonta, 2018).

According to the local primary school's headmaster, forty Batek students are currently in his school. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has limited their attendance at schools. They would only come on alternate days according to the schedule set by the school. The school headmaster claimed that the Batek children had changed tremendously and seemed to focus on getting their education. The parents, too, have taken a different perspective towards education and are beginning to understand the importance of education. R1 from Kg Bengol would chaperon the children from his village to school and wait for them at the nearby café. He would then accompany them back to the village. Currently, the children from R1's village go to school without the presence of R1 as they have become comfortable and brave enough to attend school on their own. R1 has moved to Kg. Cangkung to help the children attend school at the nearest Malay village, Kampung Pagi, which is about forty minutes by boat. R5 would accompany the children from her village to school and wait for them outside the school. Her son is currently in the school and has been attending school for over three years.



**Figure 2 (left): R1 (in white) chaperoning the children back from school and  
Figure 3 (right): A group of Batek children at their desks in the classroom**  
(Source: Researchers' Personal Collection)

**Table 4: Education for the Batek**

Theme	2011-2013	2017-2021
<b>Education</b>	<p>Children attended school but did not last long                      Government help was given, including transport, uniforms, and stationery                      The villages involved are those near Kuala Tahan                      The school involved was in Kuala Tahan                      Lack of parental involvement</p>	<p>Children attend school and follow the schedule set by the school due to COVID-19                      A program called “Chup Badui Sikulah”, translated as ‘Let’s go to school,’ was started.                      Attendance has improved and the retention rate better                      Government help was given, including transport, uniforms, and stationery                      Villages involved are those near Kuala Tahan and Kuala Sat                      The schools involved are in Kuala Tahan and Kuala Sat                      Parents have become more aware of the importance of education                      Chaperon from the villages</p>

Based on Table 4 above, the Batek seem to be in a similar position to the one in 2011-2016, but changes are happening, and there are signs of improvement. Currently, the primary school in Kuala Tahan is engaged in a program called “Chup Badui Sikulah” translated as ‘Let’s go to school’ in 2018 (Roselan Abdul Malik, 2018) with an initial enrollment of fifty-three children. The primary school in Kuala Sat has about twenty children who attend school regularly. Despite the setbacks the school and the Batek face, the children and the headmasters are optimistic that the program will succeed. According to the headmaster of the local primary school in Kuala Tahan, the Batek children have improved significantly from their first day in school. He said, “They have made a 180 degree turn from their first day here.” In addition, according to the headmaster, they receive funds from the government and NGOs to help sustain the Batek children in school. The children in Kuala Tahan attended a special class with a flexible timetable. This is partly a solution to the problem described by Nurul Fatanah Kamarul Zahari et al. (2018) where school calendar and scheduling are some of the problems for the Batek children. All these efforts from the government and NGOs bode well for the future of the Batek as education would help them lift their economic status, develop the community, and ensure a sustainable income for the tribe.

In addition to slowly accepting modern education, the encroachment of modernisation and global influences has resulted in the erosion of traditional skills and practices among the Batek, which has led to a decline in their local wisdom and cultural heritage (Mashami et al., 2023; Abdul Rahman et al., 2024). Identifying this negative impact will require more understanding and reaction between changes and sustain.

### ***Culture***

In an egalitarian society (Endicott, 1984, Endicott et al. 2016) of hunter-gatherers (Endicott, 1984, Lye, 2000, 2005), the food gathered from the forest or hunted down will be shared by the whole community (Endicott, 1984). Batek society emphasises helping each other and sharing one's resources, starting from one's own family to the immediate family and finally the community (Endicott, 1984). This behaviour is still seen today as they gather *agar* (precious wood), sell it to the Malay/Chinese traders, and share the profit. Sharing whatever resources they have is the main characteristic of an egalitarian society, which the Batek in Taman Negara still practice today.



**Figure 4: *Hayaq* in Kg Cangkung  
(Source: Researchers Personal Photo)**

The Batek huts or lean-tos (as described by Lye 2000) are made of forest wood with the roof from leaves weaved together. Various huts or *hayaq* such as *hayaq lantei* or hut with flooring made from bamboo and *hayaq deng* where walls are built around the hut to make it look like a house are built. *Hayaq lantei* is easier to construct than *hayaq deng*, which may take a few months to complete. The wall of the hut is normally made from the bark of trees; hence, it takes longer to build. The size of the *hayaq* varies according to the family living there. Certain *hayaq deng* could accommodate large families of more than five (refer to Figure 4). Some are small lean-tos that serve more as a temporary shelter or for communal gatherings or cooking, and roofs made from tarps.

The Batek children are taught hunting using blowpipes, climbing trees and other necessary skills to survive in the jungle. However, exposure to modernisation is inevitable as the Batek have slowly integrated modern tools into their lifestyle. Engine-powered boats are used instead of canoes, chainsaws are used to cut down trees, and handphones can be seen in the hands of teenagers. This is perhaps one of the changes affecting the Batek, but only to the young generations, as the older generation still lacks technological tools.

The Batek would also engage in planting fast-growing vegetables (Lye, 2002), and in the Batek villages, one would notice fast-growing crops such as chilli and cassava planted next to the *hayaq*, but these are mainly for personal consumption and not as a cash crop. Monotonous work such as crop planting is not favourable to the Batek, as pointed out by Lye (2002), and this has continued until today. Numerous banana trees and chilli plants are planted in their villages, which they use in their daily diet. The banana leaves will be used to put food or plates during meals. Despite the space they are accorded in the Taman Negara, the Batek did not take up crop planting as a source of income. It is not in the culture of these hunter-gatherers to plant long-term crops, which would entail monotonous and routine work. They would prefer to roam, hunt, gather forest produce, and search for fruits and honey. Another activity identified through a study by Abdullah et al. (2018) is producing handicrafts. When adult males enter the jungle, the women and elders spend their time carving bamboo and weaving *rattan* to make handicrafts. The handicrafts are usually sold to tourists who visit their villages and are sold to accommodate community needs (Abdullah et al., 2018). This activity was visible during the ten years of the study, with minimal changes to the products offered. One obvious difference was that the bangles that were weaved using *rattan* have colour added instead. The blowpipes and the darts have remained the same.

Their traditional knowledge of the jungle and its medicinal properties have played an important role in the Batek's lives. They do not go to the local



government clinics or general practitioners, but they use herbs and plants available in their surroundings to cure the sickness or cuts. This indicates that the Batek know the forest and the capabilities to use the environmental elements to improve their quality of life (Yunus et al., 2014). However, constant visits and checks by the doctors and nurses from the Ministry of Health have helped improve the Batek people's health. They are now more open to receiving aid in terms of medical supplies and treatments from the medical teams that visit them. In the past, they were known to be afraid of doctors or any medical treatment or medicine and would retreat deep into the forest if they heard about any visits from the medical teams.

One of the customs of the Batek is to leave the campsite or village if there is a death. In 2012, a village was constructed very close to the banks of the Tembeling River, but it was soon abandoned. Upon inquiries, the village was set up as a temporary one as somebody had passed away in their main village. The Batek believed leaving the village for a while was necessary to help the spirits pass on. However, this custom is rarely practised now as there was a death in Kg Dedari where the village had passed away, but they remained in the village (in 2017/2018). According to R4, who was there during the death, they no longer left the village to set up a temporary village because it was difficult. R3 from Kg Dedari also did not leave the village after the death of the village headman. This was similar to R2, as he did not leave his village when his village's headman died. He stayed behind with his and his sister's family as the rest of the village moved to a temporary village not far from the main village. R2 said it was too much of a hassle for him to move. It appears that this custom is no longer followed to the letter as the younger Batek felt it was too difficult to move to a temporary shelter.

### **Future of the Batek**

The Batek should be allowed to retain their cultural heritage and live as mobile hunter-gatherers despite the changes occurring within the society. Hunting and foraging are two important elements in their cultural survival; thus, continuity is pertinent. Changes are inevitable and are seen among the younger generation of Batek, but retaining their cultural identity should be an important aspect that should not be taken lightly. Modernisation and cultural survival must be synergised to grow the Batek without losing their identity. Mashami et al. (2023) and Abdul Rahman et al. (2024) argued that modernisation and global influences have led to declining their local wisdom and cultural heritage due to diminishing traditional skills and practices among the Batek.

Playing 'Batek' (Endicott et al., 2016; Fan et al., 2020) could perhaps be a way for the Batek to retain their identity and, at the same time, help them to move

forward economically. In the future, further involvement from the Batek in the ecotourism industry could be planned by incorporating them into the management and planning of ecotourism in Taman Negara instead of making them a part of the tourism product. The skills that make them appealing to tourists (blow piping, fire making demonstration, and perhaps tree climbing) should be passed down to the younger generation to ensure the continuity of the culture. Despite the criticism of the Batek playing 'Batek', it helps the tribe ensure sustainable income for them, as well as a chance to show the outside world what it is like to be a mobile hunter-gatherer tribe. As such, it raises awareness of the need to preserve the cultural heritage of the Aboriginal people.

Education can help to develop the Batek into a better society. Various studies have discussed education problems among the Orang Asli and iterated on the importance of education to elevate the status of the Orang Asli (Wahab et al., 2017; Zei et al., 2018). The Batek children are slowly embracing the idea of education, and so do their parents. Nurul Fatanah Kamarul Zahari et al. (2018) highlighted education problems with the Batek and suggested some measures, including a change in the syllabus. This idea was initially mooted by Wahab et al. (2013), who suggested the integration of their heritage and culture into the classroom. This could perhaps inculcate further interest among the Batek children (and parents) into taking education more seriously. There are indications from the headmaster of the local primary school that the Batek children are coming to school more regularly, and this would bode well for the future. The study by Abdullah, Ahmad and Ismail (2023) has shown the chaperon's important role in ensuring that the Batek children attend school regularly. However, perhaps the most important issue would be to retain their interest in school. Studies have shown that enrollment alone would not guarantee any success, but the most important is retention in school (Azlin Norhaini Mansor et al., 2013). Hence, a crucial step to be taken is to help them maintain their interest in school and eventually become a part of society. It would be long before the Batek are able to have children who have completed school or perhaps tertiary education, but they are heading in the right direction now, and the relevant authorities need to ensure they stay on the path.

As Batek becomes more exposed to technologies and higher education, there could be changes from how they were in the past. The introduction of new technologies, consumer trends, and economic systems through globalisation has challenged the traditional way of life of the Batek, impacting their identity, values, and social cohesion (Das & Mukherjee, 2019; Adnan et al., 2021). Moreover, the impact of globalisation on the Batek tribe extends to their environmental interactions and cultural resilience. The changing global climate, deforestation,

and resource exploitation have threatened the traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable practices of the Batek in managing their natural resources (Schramm et al., 2020; Nieto-Quintano et al., 2018). Additionally, the integration of the Batek tribe into the global market economy and tourism industry has raised questions about the preservation of their cultural authenticity, self-determination, and rights as indigenous peoples in the face of external influences and development pressures (Adnan et al., 2021). Overall, the multifaceted impact of globalisation on the Batek tribe underscores the need for inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to sustainable development, health promotion, and environmental conservation that respect the unique identity and heritage of Indigenous communities in Malaysia.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Batek tribe of Taman Negara has faced significant challenges in getting proper education due to their remote locations, economic challenges, and cultural preference for traditional lifestyles. In spite of the government's efforts to provide the necessary facilities, retaining the Batek children in school was difficult. Nonetheless, positive changes have been seen in recent years. A shift in the parents' perspective of education and the presence of chaperones have led to more regular school attendance among Batek children.

Culturally, the Batek continue to value their egalitarian traditions despite introducing modern tools and technologies that threaten their traditional skills and knowledge. While the younger generation is slowly adapting to modern living, ensuring they do not forego their cultural heritage is critical. Involving the Batek in ecotourism and other sustainable economic activities can help to supplement their income and, at the same time, align with their traditional skills and knowledge. This would support them economically and promote Batek's culture to a broader audience.

Over the ten-year period discussed in the study, education seems to be the prominent change in Batek society. As education would be the best option for the Batek to improve themselves, more research into improving their education should be looked into. Chaperones should be used to retain their interest in going to school and should be expanded and studied in depth. The program should be extended to other villages in Taman Negara, and the impact of such a program should be studied in detail. This would help relevant authorities develop a better and more impactful program for the Batek children. Continued support from the government, NGOs, and policies that value their heritage will ensure a sustainable and prosperous future for the Batek community.

Despite the influx of modernisation (tools and gadgets) and tourists into their lives, the Batek have managed to sustain their cultural identity as the last mobile hunter-gatherer. Adapting to these changes would be difficult for the Batek because there are bound to be conflicts within them or with outsiders. Nevertheless, this peace-loving society would continue to survive in their ancestral land and become the guardian of the *hep* of Taman Negara.

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