



29 SEP, 2026

## Coexisting with wildlife in Belum -Temenggor



The Star, Malaysia

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# Sharing the wild

Within Perak’s Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex, Orang Asli villagers balance respect for nature with ecotourism and conservation to keep their communities thriving. >2&3

**Pristine attraction:** Visitors enjoying the experience of swimming among wild mahseer at Kelah Sanctuary in Belum Temenggor, Perak. — FARID WAHAB/The Star



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FOR tourists cruising the rivers of Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex, a glimpse of an elephant, a hornbill or rare Malayan tiger is the highlight of an ecotourism holiday.

But for Orang Asli communities living along these riverbanks, the growing presence of predators and large mammals near their homes brings anxiety, not wonder.

Their fears intensified recently when a tiger wandered into Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang – a Jahai tribe settlement of 120 households deep inside the rainforest complex.

Accessible only by a 45 to 60-minute boat ride from the Pulau Banding Jetty in Gerik, Perak, the village is one of the largest indigenous settlements in the area.

It is not just predators causing concern. Elephants frequently raid the community's small plots of durian, coconut and tapioca.

"They usually come at night," said Azhar Ruah, who is deputy chairman of the village cooperative, formed to coordinate socio-economic initiatives and infrastructure development for the community.

"Residents have to stay up to keep watch and alert the village whenever elephants enter.

"We are not equipped to handle this; we have been using loud hailers just to scare them away," said the 35-year-old father-of-one.

Boatman Abie Keneban, 38, said rising wildlife incursions into their villages were squeezing traditional livelihoods as locals became increasingly wary of venturing into the forest.

"Besides farming, some depend on fishing, while others still search for agarwood though supply has dwindled," said Abie, who has six children.

### Pilot project

To mitigate the crisis, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia is working alongside local authorities and the community.

WWF-Malaysia community engagement assistant manager Umi A'zuhrah Abd Rahman said installation of fences and sirens at hotspots had been proposed to provide early warnings and deter wild animals from entering villages.

Besides Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang, another village chosen for the project is Kampung Sungai Chiong.

Umi A'zuhrah said the plan was developed with feedback gathered from 160 households across the two villages.

"We conducted the survey from July to December last year as part of our efforts to mitigate human-wildlife conflict in the area," she elaborated.

"The findings were presented to Perak State Parks Corporation (PSPC), which has expressed its support.

"Earlier this year, we also engaged Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan), which agreed to provide technical expertise for the project," she said.

She added that WWF-Malaysia would provide initial funding. Umi A'zuhrah said the initia-

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Orang Asli villagers rely on ecotourism to limit peril of foraging

PERAK



An elephant herd spotted near Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang.



Orang Asli settlements can be found scattered across Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex.

tive was expected to be rolled out in the coming months, starting with Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang.

"We have identified 20 to 30 villagers as volunteers to monitor the system after installation.

"In the meantime, we have provided them with headlamps and safety vests as an interim safety measure," she said.

### Ecotourism initiatives

As human-wildlife tension limits traditional forest foraging, local leaders and agencies are pivoting towards community-led ecotourism to secure stable income for the villagers.

This includes activities capitalising on the area's rich biodiversity and the natural appeal of

local wildlife.

One such effort is the "Akek Chep" initiative, a collaboration between PSPC and Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB), launched in the early 2020s.

Meaning "don't catch" in the Jahai language, "Akek Chep" promotes freshwater conservation by protecting native fish populations.



Nordin says wilderness around Kampung Sungai Tiang divided into zones to regulate farming and fishing activities.



Abie: Many Orang Asli families cultivate small farms to sustain their household income.



Lau: Limited funding complicates efforts to protect Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex.

Resident Nordin Asu, 41, said under the initiative, wilderness surrounding Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang was divided into four zones – blue, green, red and yellow – each with different rules governing farming and fishing activities.

"The red area is off-limits, yellow can only be harvested once a year, green is for gathering forest vegetables, and blue is open for fishing.

"We don't know the exact size of each zone, but markers have been placed throughout the forest to show the boundaries," he said.

Among the attractions developed under "Akek Chep" is the Kelah Sanctuary, a popular picnic spot where visitors can observe wild mahseer, a freshwater fish native to the rainforest.

As the sanctuary lies within the red conservation zone, fishing or catching is strictly prohibited.

Boatman and Gerik resident



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Umi A'zuhrah (left) distributing bread to Orang Asli children at Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tiang as part of WWF-Malaysia's engagement with the community.

Mohd Amirulnizam Hassan Saari, 43, who regularly ferries visitors from Pulau Banding Jetty, believes the rainforest has immense ecotourism potential. He is part of a local boatmen's association comprising 170 members operating inside the forest complex. "We get visitors every day. Some come for fishing trips and hiking, others will check out the Orang Asli villages," he said. "Here, in this forest, humans and wildlife coexist. That is a huge part of its charm."

### Safeguarding constraints

Behind these community initiatives lies the larger challenge of safeguarding the Belum-Temenggor landscape itself. PSPC, which manages the Royal Belum State Park, said limited

funding, manpower and technology continued to constrain long-term conservation efforts. Its director, Lau Ching Fong said that while the agency received allocations from state and Federal governments, most funding remained project-based. He said that although grants had been secured, these were solely for use on certain projects and upon conditions set by donors. "What we lack is a sustainable source of funding, and that limits our ability to make long-term plans." Lau noted that greater investment in research, monitoring technology and forest surveillance would strengthen wildlife conservation and help authorities respond more effectively to threats across the vast rainforest complex.



Mohd Amirulnizam says human-wildlife coexistence is a huge part of Belum-Temenggor's charm.

Still, he believes collaboration has begun to turn the tide. "In 2016, we experienced an influx of poachers and recovered 300 snares inside the forest. "But over the past three years,



Visitors boarding boats at Pulau Banding Jetty to take in the sights and sounds of Belum-Temenggor Forest Complex.



The Orang Asli community in Belum-Temenggor utilises the forest for their livelihood but are increasingly wary of animal encounters.

we have recorded zero snares targeting big mammals," he said. Lau credited joint efforts between PSPC, Perhilitan, non-governmental organisations and private partners.

The improvement, he said, offered hope that both wildlife and the Orang Asli communities who have called Belum-Temenggor home for generations can continue to coexist.