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**INDIGENOUS PEOPLES LIVING IN PROTECTED AREAS: AN OBSERVATION ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN KAMPUNG PETA, ENDAU-ROMPIN NATIONAL PARK**

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**ABSTRACT**

COVID-19 pandemic is not only a significant threat to public health. It also has a serious economic impact on people's livelihood including indigenous peoples or Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia even though they are living far away in rural areas, such as in protected areas. This paper aims to share our observation on an Orang Asli community in Kampung Peta, which is located at the entrance of Endau Rompin National Park, Johor, Malaysia. The research is based on a preliminary observation and casual conversation with the villagers in a recent visit. From our short visit to the village in March 2020, we found that even before the Restricted Movement Order (RMO) was implemented, the pandemic has impacted the livelihood of Kampung Peta people whose income are also dependent on tourism activities in the national park. With the effect of Covid-19 expected to last for years to come, it is important to ensure the policy development addresses the minority community groups who live in the rural area including the national park.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous peoples, Orang Asli, Protected Areas, Covid-19, Endau-Rompin National Park*

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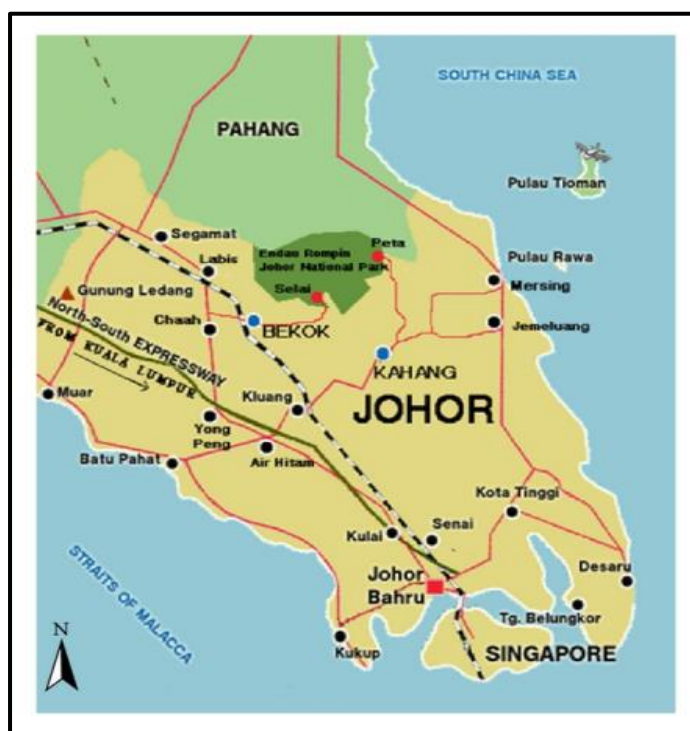
## Introduction

Everyone worldwide has been affected in some ways by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. However, it has been noted that there is a marked inequity in the impact and threat of the disease for Indigenous Peoples worldwide (Tamara et al., 2020). The Malaysian Commission on Human Rights (Suhakam) has also highlighted that as the poorest and marginalised group in Malaysia, the indigenous peoples difficulties have been further compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, with their access to medicines, healthcare, food, education and livelihoods badly affected (Suhakam, 2020). However, in adversity, the indigenous peoples have also demonstrated resilience in responding to the challenges brought about by the pandemic. By practicing their traditional knowledge and solutions to survive, sourcing for food and herbs from the surrounding jungles, they have proven to be more resilient in facing the pandemic (Suhakam, 2020).

In this paper, we share our preliminary observation on the impact of Covid-19 on an Orang Asli community in Kampung Peta, which is in the vicinity of Endau-Rompin National Park, Johor. It also seeks to highlight the position of the Orang Asli communities as indigenous peoples in the country and issues faced by them. We visited the village right before the Movement Control Order was implemented in March 2020. The discussion in this paper is based on our observation from our visit and casual conversation with the villagers, apart from the data available from existing literature.

## Background of Kampung Peta

Kampung Peta is one of the indigenous peoples' villages of Jakun tribe. The village is located in remote areas which is about 56 km from Kluang-Mersing junction (Rohayu et al., 2019). It is in the district of Mersing, Johor and adjacent to the Endau-Rompin National Park and Endau river (Rohayu et al., 2019). Kampung Peta has become the main entrance of Endau Rompin National Park from the east side (Hussain et al., 2017). The map of Kampung Peta is attached below (Siti Fatimah et al., 2016).



Map 1: Map of Endau-Rompin National Park

Endau-Rompin National Park was gazetted as a protected area under National Parks (Johor) Corporation Enactment 1989. The size is 25, 295 hectares. In the same year, Kampung Peta was also gazetted as aboriginal areas under section 6 of the *Aboriginal Peoples Act 1954* by Johor state government.

There was a conflict as to the extent of the land right of the Jakun Orang Asli in the area. In 2012, a notice was issued by the Mersing Land Administrator to vacate certain area of land within the national park.

Whereas from the perspective of the Orang Asli, they continue to have customary land right over certain areas of land within the park. A case was brought to the High Court for a judicial review contending the validity of the notice based on their entitlement to the customary land. The High Court allowed the application affirming that the Jakun communities have customary rights over the land that they have exercised since a long time including to the areas that they access for hunting and foraging.

We visited Kampung Peta in March 2020, three days before the Restriction Movement Order (RMO) was implemented due to Covid-19 pandemic. After about three hours of driving from Bangi, we arrived at the Johor Endau Rompin National Park Office located in Kahang town in a district of Kluang, Johor, for the purpose of registration to enter the National Park.

After completing the registration process, we boarded a four-wheel drive vehicle of the National Park Office from Pekan Kahang to Kampung Peta. The 60-kilometer journey took about two and half hours across several oil palm plantation areas before entering the Endau Rompin National Park area. The journey was quite challenging as it went through a bumpy and dusty dirt road before entering the Park.

Like many other villages, Kampung Peta is well equipped with basic facilities. It was redeveloped under a resettlement program, managed by the Department of Orang Asli Affairs (JAKOA). Houses are provided with electricity and water supply. Primary schools, kindergarten, police post, clinic, public hall and religious buildings are built by the government. Asphalted roads are laid throughout the village. There is also a jetty for water transportations.

### **Orang Asli Jakun**

The indigenous people of Kampung Peta are known as the Jakun tribe, the second largest group of Orang Asli who live in southern peninsular Malaysia, especially in south Pahang and Johor. The term Orang Asli is a Malay phrase for ‘original peoples’ or ‘first peoples’. They are minorities and regarded as the first inhabitants of Peninsular Malaysia. There are 18 groups of the Orang Asli with distinct religion, social organisation and physical characteristics. The 18 groups are classified into 3 groups: Proto-Malay, Negrito and Sen’oi. The number of the Orang Asli is 178 197 as at 2010 and constitute less than 0.5% of the Malaysian population.

Jakun is one of the tribal communities of the Proto-Malay origin. Linguistic and archaeological evidence suggested that the first migrants of the Proto Malay, originated from Taiwan around 4000 to 3000 BC. This migration took place towards Borneo, Sulawesi, Central Java and Eastern Indonesia through the Philippines (Leonard, 2001, 316). The Jakun community is believed to have a major lineage from Yunan in Southern China and began migrating 5,000 years ago. The original settlements of the Jakun community were scattered along the Endau River valley.

The population of Jakun community in Kampung Peta is about 220 people with 67 households, which represents 2% of the whole Orang Asli in Johor (Siti Fatimah Sabran, 2016). However, that number does not include those who emigrated out due to several factors such as furthering studies, marriage and work (Jamiran, 2014).

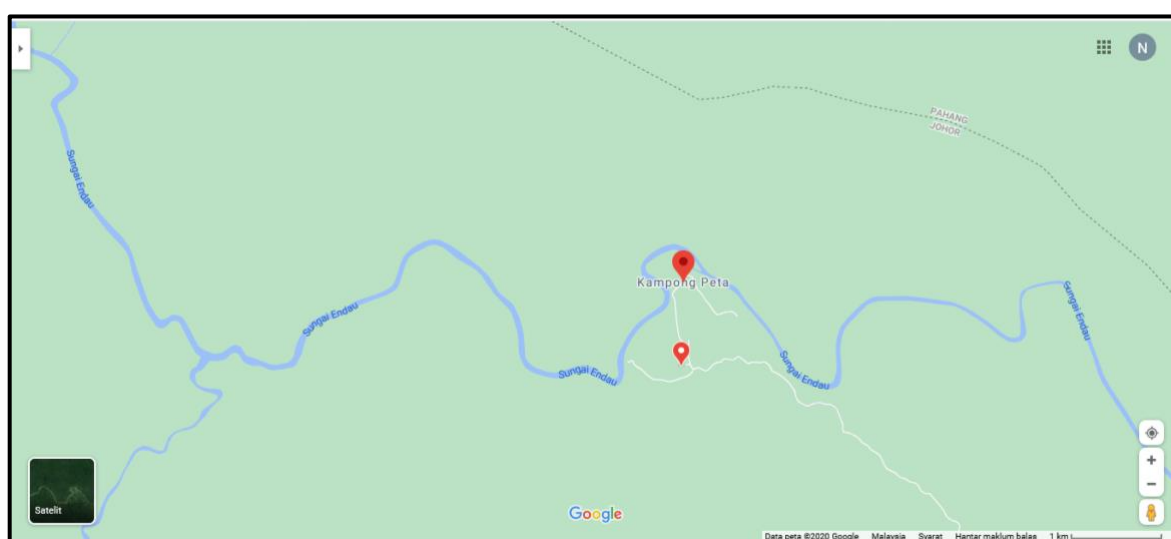
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They are still practicing traditional lifestyle amidst modern facilities and strongly adhere to their ancestor's beliefs as their way of life. They speak Jakun dialect which is a sub-dialect of the Malay language.

It is reported that most Orang Asli kids in the village complete the primary school. There is a primary school, Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Peta in the village. It has 40 pupils and 12 teachers. As the distance from the village to the town nearby is quite far, the teachers there are very kind to the community and will take orders to buy things from outside once they go out from the village.

### Livelihood of Orang Asli in Kg Peta

Located in the vicinity of the forested area and along Endau River (see map below - taken from google map), the livelihood of the villagers relies heavily on natural resources in the surrounding area. Their economic activities include fishing, hunting, farming and collection of forest products such as *petai* and rattan.



Map 2: Map of Endau-Rompin National Park. Source: Google Map

However, recent years have shown tremendous changes in their lifestyle (Siti Fatimah et al., 2016). They have diversified economic activities including tourism-based activities and rubber plantation. Many serve as tour guides and boat carriers on a regular basis due to their in-depth knowledge of tropical forest. These activities provide them a quite good income. During good season, they can earn up to RM1,500 to RM2,000 a month. Some also work at the National Park management office.

Besides there are also villagers who are active in the craft industry such as making cloth from the bark of Terap tree and “kercang” for traditional games (Hussain et al., 2017; Jamiran, 2014).

In addition, some also have homestay business at the village for tourists who come to visit the National Park. They establish a company to manage the villagers' rubber plantations and to promote the service of eco-tourism at the National Park. With the effort of the company, the activity of eco-tourism had managed to penetrate European market and was able to bring tourists from there all year round (Hussain et al., 2017).

Therefore, the development of ecotourism has become a factor that empowers the economic position of the indigenous people. Because of favourable job opportunities, during good seasons, almost all youths and adults in Kampung Peta have guaranteed jobs with high incomes and have been able to free them

from the grip of poverty. This situation shows that the eco-tourism activity has provided positive economic returns to the local Orang Asli community (Said, 2008).

During our visit, we had an informal conversation with a female Orang Asli who works at the National Park office. She is married to a Jakun man from Rompin, Pahang. Besides working with the park management, she also collects and dries rattan to supplement her income and sometimes helps her father who got a contract to cut grasses in the park area.

We also had the opportunity to have a conversation with a female Orang Asli, a tourist guide who took us on the jungle trekking activity. She is married and casually follows her husband as a tourist guide. The 36-year-old mother of six, aged between 2 and 17, also collects rattan to supplement household income. She told us that her youngest child is taken care of by older siblings when she is out for work.

From informal conversation and observation, we found that the Orang Asli community in Kampung Peta is involved in mixed economic activities such as rubber tapping, collection of forest products such as rattan and *petai*, collection of fruit during season, hunting and fishing. Rubber trees are planted in a specific location nearby the village and guarded by dogs. The price of rubber is not so good nowadays, and many would do other jobs instead for additional income.



Picture 1: Data Collection Phase

Collection of forest products such as rattan, *petai* and durian depends on the season. As for fruit trees, many trees are inherited from older generations and considered as belonging to family. They will sell the yield when the season comes. Fish from the river such as *kelah* and *baung* are also good sources for food.

### **Impact of Covid-19 to their livelihood**

As the people of Kampung Peta depend very much on tourism activities, we found that even before the Restricted Movement Order (RMO) was implemented, the pandemic has impacted the livelihood of Kampung Peta people. We were informed that the number of tourists coming to the area has declined sharply since the outbreak of Covid-19 in late 2019. The area has been practically lonely for quite a long time. This affects the source of cash income of the people although they may still rely on resources from the river and surrounding areas to cover some of daily basic subsistence.

Besides, food and other supplies have been more expensive than before although the price is already high due to distance from town and limited suppliers.

## Conclusion

This paper provides a sample as to the impact of Covid-19 in the livelihood of people who live within the vicinity of protected areas such as the Endau-Rompin National Park. It also seeks to highlight the position of the Orang Asli communities as indigenous peoples in the country and issues faced by them.

From our short visit to the village in March 2020, we found that even before the Restricted Movement Order (RMO) was implemented, the pandemic has impacted the livelihood of Kampung Peta people whose income are also dependent on tourism activities in the national park. With the effect of Covid-19 expected to last for years to come, it is important to ensure the policy development addresses the minority community groups who live in the rural area including the national park.

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