

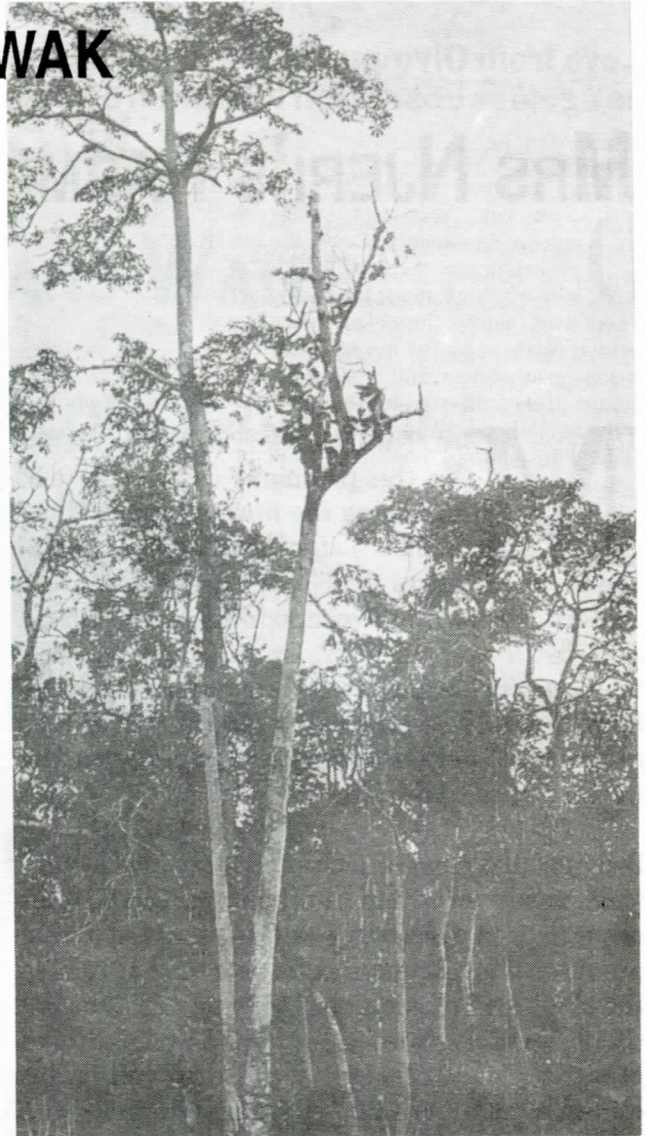
THE PENAN OF SARAWAK

For thousands of years the Penan have lived in harmony with the forest, harvesting and not destroying the forest which sustains their survival. This is a society where women and men participate equally in maintaining communal life in the forest.

In March 1987, thousands of indigenous people in Sarawak, Malaysia, formed human barricades across logging roads in the deep interior of the tropical rainforest. For more than 20 years, their forest has been ripped apart for logs which are predominantly exported to Japan.

Entire villages walked for days across the mountains to the logging roads which traverse their lands. While the men set up wooden fences and built rest shelters, the women wove leaves for roof thatch and organized food supplies. Breast-feeding mothers, old women, young children and men stood in vigil, stopping logging operations for almost seven months. The police and army forcibly dismantled the blockades and arrested some of the men. Blockades were set up again at the end of 1988, and in early January 1989, more than 100 Penan men were arrested under a newly created offence designed to criminalize the Penans' battle for their legitimate land rights. The women take over the responsibilities of the villages, seeking food and water supplies. Many have to stand by helplessly while their children have less and less to eat and polluted water causes diseases to increase.

The struggle of the Penan to maintain their culture and way of life is dismissed as 'primitive'. They are urged to join the mainstream and be 'developed'. But the reality is that no alternative is offered for the deprivation of their forest resources. Where resettlement has taken place in other native communities, the effects



have been negative, leading to a breakdown in the community itself and a dependency on the cash economy.

Meanwhile arrests and intimidations continue, but the Penan refuse to give up. As the forest dwindles, the Penan have to walk for days to seek food and clean water. The land is their life. 'If we don't do something to protect the little that is left, there will be nothing for our children. Until we die we will block this road.'

Source: *Women and the Environment*, Annabel Rodda, 1991. Zed Press, 57 Caledonian Road, London N1 9BU, U.K.