

Forest dwellers find urban life stressful

A new study suggests that the move from forest to town has its downside for Indonesia's Punan

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A RECENT STUDY of the Punan people in the ITTO-supported Malinau Research Forest [ITTO PROJECT PD 39/00 REV.3 (F)] in Indonesia's East Kalimantan suggests that forest-based lifestyles can be much healthier than those on offer in nearby towns.

The study, by scientists from the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and the French Institute for Research and Development (IRD), compared two Punan communities of the same origin, language and culture—one still living in the deep forest, the other living in the mining and timber town of Malinau.

The majority of Punan now live in such urban centres. Of the few thousand who still live in forested landscapes, most are small-scale farmers whose forays into the forest for herbal medicines, vegetables and wild boar and deer are more seasonal than daily.

But even this modified traditional forest way of life is often healthier than a 'modern' lifestyle. The study found that forest Punan eat more nutritiously, suffer fewer weight-related problems and are generally in better condition than the Punan living in Malinau, who eat more processed foods and suffer more weight-related health problems.

"Once in town, many Punan find life stressful," says CIFOR-IRD's Dr Edmond Dounias. "In the forest, processed foods and sugar weren't on the menu, they were fit from their active lifestyle, and measles and other 'urban' diseases were virtually unknown. When they move into town they are often marginalised and treated unfairly. It's not surprising that alcohol and drug problems are emerging. Sexually transmitted diseases are also increasing. Making matters worse is the loss of their culture of mutual aid that would support them and even help with medical costs."

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Dounias says the study has generated considerable government interest and believes it will help officials make better planning decisions.



Dayak man in traditional headdress. Photo: Herwasono Soedjito

"Authorities often feel that improving the lives of remote tribes means moving them into the modern world. Our research shows officials that by helping urban Punan to keep some of their traditional lifestyle, they will be better off and so will the town," Dounias says.

Moreover, he says, governments, aid agencies and NGOs now have evidence "that taking schools and dispensaries to the people in the forest, and not vice-versa, may have better development outcomes".

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