

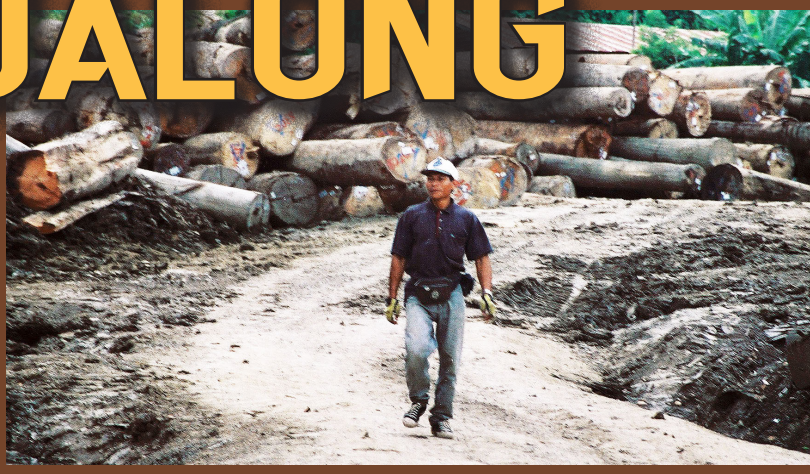
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Pusat KOMAS MALAYSIA





GARA JALONG





Gara doing traditional warrior dance (top left), Gara in Long Lawen longhouse (top middle), communities exodus from Bakun (top right) Bakin Dam (bottom left), monitoring logging activities (bottom right)

The Man Who Fought the Bakun Dam

Gara Jalong a Kenyah Badeng village headman enjoys the luscious view of his village Long Lawen from high ground. He is trying to catch the inconsistent internet signal which comes and goes daily. He wants to send a message to his daughter and her family in Bintulu town, a 5-hour drive from his village.

Long Lawen is located upriver, directly above the Bakun Dam reservoir in the Belaga District of Sarawak, Malaysia. When the Bakun Dam flooded the surrounding rainforest in the late 1990s, the residents of Long Lawen refused to move to the government's official Sungai Asap resettlement site.

Instead, the community moved upstream, settling independently above the main dam and reservoir zone. The village sits adjacent to the upper reaches of the flooded basin, and the only access to the community is through remote, rugged terrain and logging tracks.

The Damned Dam

Bakun Hydroelectric Dam is a 205-meter mammoth dam and Southeast Asia's largest hydroelectric plant. It drowned nearly 700 square kilometers of rainforest and uprooted 10,000 indigenous lives in Sarawak State in Malaysia.

The project was revived in 1993 and officially began construction in 1996. Fifteen years later in 2011, the dam first began operations churning out 2,400 MW of electricity. In Sarawak, mega dams have drowned hundreds of kilometers of rainforest in one of the world's most vital carbon sinks (*any natural or artificial system that absorbs more carbon dioxide (CO_2) from the atmosphere than it releases such as trees, oceans, forests and soil*).

In early 2026, the Sarawak Energy Berhad (SEB) announced plans to construct another 5 dams which are estimated to churn out almost 2,000 MW of electricity, while the ongoing Baleh Dam construction targeted to be completed by 2030, will produce almost 1,300 MW of electricity.





Sungai Asap Relocation Settlement (top), Gara the community organizer (right)

Decomposing organic material at the bottom of dam reservoirs releases about a billion tons of methane a year globally. Governments repeatedly claim mega-hydro systems are clean energy but it is actually green washing of the highest degree.

When the multi-billion-ringgit Bakun project advanced in the late 1990s, the Sarawak state authorities forced 15 longhouses to relocate to the official Sungai Asap resettlement scheme. Those who did not abide by this government plan were being written off as “squatters” on state land, excluding them from roads, clean water, and the electrical grid.

Many families and whole communities voluntarily relocated lured by promises of modern amenities. But Gara knew that without viable land, the Indigenous rainforest communities will drastically lose their way of life, food source and income.

Most alarming is many of them would be reduced to doing day laboring in distant towns. Gara together with many of his neighbors in Long Gang community in Bakun recognized this impending threat and decided to devise their own strategic plans istead.

Organized Resistance

Campaigning against the Bakun Dam has earned Gara Jalong and his fellow activists the label “troublemakers and anti-development”. Despite challenges and obstacles often resulting in personal sacrifices, he has been actively organizing indigenous communities across the Sarawak state since the 1980’s. Gara organized Indigenous communities to form human blockades, and protest actions to stop timber corporations that were carving up their ancestral forests. His resistance along with others resulted in Gara being arrested 5 times by the police, his passport revoked and blacklisted in an international travel ban imposed by the Malaysian government.

Since the 1980’s Sarawak State was notorious for illegal and unsustainable logging through timber concessions held by Malaysia's largest timber conglomerates such as Samling, Rimbunan Hijau, and WTK aided by local political elites. By the mid-1980s, commercial logging concessions had devastated about 60% of Sarawak’s total forest area and the state supplied more than 50% of the world's total tropical log exports.

In response to the rapidly increasing destruction of ancestral forests, and rivers in Sarawak then, Gara together with several local leaders from different divisions in Sarawak state set up the Indigenous Peoples Development Centre (IPDC). This was a local indigenous-led non-governmental organization (NGO) which focused on organizing Indigenous communities to protect their customary lands, forest and human rights.

In 1998, when the government executed massive exodus operations in Bakun, Gara led a defiant group from his Long Gang community in Bakun to move upstream to higher ground at Sungai Tekulang. They built a new settlement entirely on their own terms, naming it Long Lawen.

Although constantly being criticised and harassed by the police and authorities, Gara had always remain determined to continue organizing and advocating for the rights of the affected Bakun communities.

“The new settlement in Sungai Asap will not sustain our lives in the long run, if we move there, we will have no lost forests and viable farmlands, how will our families survive?”, Gara shared.






Gara being blessed by Kayan indigenous elders (top left), monitoring riverside communities (top right), Aerial view of Long Lawen community (bottom left), community meal along the riverbanks in the Bakun area (bottom right)

Several months after many communities affected by the Bakun Dam had moved into the Sg. Asap resettlement, many began to feel the stark and bare conditions of their new homes. Some Long Gang families who were previously critical of Gara's plans in setting up Long Lawen community asked to be included.

"In the past, when we campaigned against the Bakun Dam, the people criticized us and called us troublemakers. They didn't know and understand, but now they begin to regret and they see what we were talking about before is true."

Although he was tempted to refuse them, Gara never begrudged them and so they became part of the newly established Long Lawen community. Today, Long Lawen consists of 66 connected units *(pintu)* across a cluster of wooden longhouses, home to 88 families and nearly 370 residents.

Long Lawen Gets Recognized

By 2001, through more than 3 years of persistence, Gara and his people earned unofficial recognition of their customary land in Long Lawen. Gara researched official documentation and produced irrefutable proof through community mapping of their ancestral territory.

He led some of his community leaders to catalog traditional flora and fauna, documented generations of oral history, and identified ancient sacred sites.After a long and tedious process, they were able to establish a recognized footprint spanning tens of thousands of hectares of Native Customary Rights (NCR) land.

"We spent hours, days, week and months visiting the local District Office, seizing opportunities to advocate different government officials, and lobbying friendly members of the civil service in local government offices to help Long Lawen gain official recognition," Gara shared.

"Our longhouse is in the community forest reserve, and it used to be 9,800 hectares of land. Now, the community forest reserve is left with 6,166 hectares of land after part of it was taken by the timber company," Gara said. He added that currently they had a total of 35,133 hectares of NCR land, which included the community forest reserve.

Harnessing the River

Long Lawen was then shrouded in total darkness at night. Ironically, the Bakun mega dam below generating thousands of megawatts of electricity just bypasses them entirely. After some years of relying on expensive diesel generators, Gara was able to utilize the abundant natural resources of the fast-flowing jungle streams around them to build a community-led micro-hydro system.

They were able to receive technical support from certain civil society groups to set up a mini hydroelectric system with a small turbine that channels water pressure to generate about 12 kilowatts of clean, free electricity. It was able to power the local clinic, schoolhouse, and longhouse corridors 24 hours a day.

To keep it running, Gara instituted a communal system with each family contributing a small fee into a shared pool to pay a local villager to clear river debris and maintain the turbine. When parts wear out, the longhouse fixes them together using basic tools.

Fortunately some years ago, the government connected the community with the main electric grid, providing them with state-generated electricity. Since then, they only use the mini hydro set up as a backup electricity system.

Preparing the Next Generation





Mini Hydro set up in Long Lawen (top), Kayan youth conducting indigenoue ceremony (bottom)

Gara himself leads a grounded, quiet existence. He tends to his vegetable gardens, works on his modest crops, and occasionally uses his vehicle to transport passengers across river tracks to make ends meet. His children have built lives of their own- his daughter teaches secondary school in Bintulu, while all his four sons all have jobs of their own.

He never claims to be a legend of any kind, nor does he claim to have solved every problem in his community. But he hopes that his life and efforts will serve as clear and powerful examples for the next generations to emulate.

He continues to participate in advocacy campaigns and activities against lobsided development which continues to persist in Sarawak until today. He is especially concerned about the future of their indigenous communities and culture especially among the youth who is the next generation expected to carry the legacy of his people.

"Young people tend to look for jobs in nearby towns but if they equip themselves with skills, knowledge and have strong will, their ancestral land will continue to fill their stomachs and bring in cash for their families," Gara said.

"The Indigenous youth and even the children must be taught to protect our indigenous values, and resources. They must know how to manage, use and protect our ancestral land otherwise it will remain idly or worse, taken by outside forces" Gara concluded. ●

Additional photo credits: *Bakun Dam (https://www.sarawakenergy.com/bakun-hydroelectric-plant/bakun-hep-research-and-development). Gara in Long Lawen longhouse, Mini Hydro set up in Long Lawen (https://www.resilience.org/stories/2019-07-24/resolving-energy-poverty-in-sarawak-indigenous-solutions-to-the-climate-crisis/)*