

tong tana

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Bruno Manser's Photographs to go Online

Penan «family album» documents threatened rainforest culture

After two years of preparation, the time has come. Bruno Manser's photos are accessible on Internet as of April 19th. Of more than 10,000 photos that the rainforest advocate took during his travels, some 1,000 can now be called up digitally. One click is enough for us to plunge into the pictorial world of the person who became known as the protagonist of the rainforest and who has since disappeared and been declared dead.

As a matter of recollection, Bruno left for Borneo in 1984 and lived there together with the Penan for six years. After his return to Switzerland in 1990, and until the time of his disappearance in 2000, he visited his friends almost every year. As he could only enter Sarawak illegally after 1990, he frequently chose ways that led through Indonesian Kalimantan where he photographed neighbouring ethnic groups such as the Kenyah and Basap. In 1995, the rainforest activist also travelled to the Congo in Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo) where he spent time with the nomadic Baefe Pygmies who are known for hunting with nets.

In addition to the photos from Africa and Indonesia, as well as photos of the various campaigns and activities that Bruno staged with his colleagues in Switzerland and Europe, the pictorial material from Sarawak forms the core of the collection.





Initially, Bruno Manser travelled without a camera. He was the person who never withdrew cash from an ATM, using the bank counter instead, and had little interest in technical things. Instead he sketched what he observed during his travels. As he started to become aware of the extent to which his Penan friends were being threatened in their very existence and to realise the importance of photographic material as a documentation of their way of life, he overcame his resistance to technology and started to photograph, probably in 1987.

Photographic documentation of life in the rainforest

After trying to compose pictures and position people, Manser came to terms with simply pointing the camera at whatever seemed important to him. He began to photograph the Penan, their social life and their surroundings.

Manser extensively documented the lives of the Penan in the forest and their approach to nature. Many photos are dedicated to family life and portray the Penan interacting with their children and their children playing together. The photos show how the forest people live in airy huts made of bamboo and leaves, seeming to float one and one half meters above the ground.

Bruno Manser shows many family scenes, couples – some younger, some older – partly with their children and partly as extended family groups. The photos always make it clear, however, that Manser is not photographing as an ethnologist. Instead, the series has the character of a family album. The Penan are neither scrutinised nor surveyed by the camera. It is also obvious from the fact that Bruno did not photograph everything. Although he precisely describes a birth in his diaries, he never photographed the procedure itself.

Many photos are also dedicated to the Penan's nomadic way of life. Even if the Penan are accustomed to a very modest and unassuming lifestyle, the shift in camping places requires an effort that is not insignificant. Manser's photos illustrate how everything – from cooking utensils to woven mats and domestic animals – is transported on their backs by using frames made from bamboo and rattan.

But what happens when a Penan has difficulty in walking? An especially moving picture depicts Along Sega, the headman of Long Adang, transporting his disabled son on a litter made out of rattan and bamboo.

Means for the political fight

During his first stay, and until his return to Switzerland, Bruno Manser approached photography in a rather unsystematic way. In this period, he almost never tried to capture an entire procedure, such as the step-by-step processing of sago. His diary was with him for that purpose.

However, Manser realised that these photos could be of use to him in his fight against the destruction of the rainforest. As of 1994, he often boarded a plane and systematically documented the traces of the destruction of the primeval forest from the air. In the first flight, Manser shot eighteen films alone. During his subsequent trips, he repeatedly documented specific aspects of the lives of the Penan as well as the devastation of their lebensraum.

The Bruno Manser Photo Archive Project

For more than two years, the Basel historian Isabelle Iser, and the historian and photo archivist Erwin Zbinden (picturebale.ch) have been working to professionally conserve, catalogue and prepare 320 of Bruno Manser's films for publication on Internet. The pictures were digitalised by the division for micrography at Basel's Bürgerspital (city hospital).

The project is part of the efforts of the Bruno Manser Fonds to document the endangered rainforest culture of the Penan in the Malaysian state of Sarawak.

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The difference between the intact primary forests and the land on which timber firms had started to log can be clearly determined on the aerial photos. In 1998, Bruno photographed the areas in which the timber companies were carrying out their destructive work from the ground. The contrast between these images and those showing the Penan in the forest is appalling. On the one hand an intact forest providing the Penan with their lebensraum, and on the other hand an eroded and cratered landscape.

During his trips, Bruno Manser also documented the production of sago flour. We can see how the Penan remove the pith, or «heartwood», from the Sago Palm, how the sago starch is extracted, how the sago powder is dried and how sago is prepared. Photos also show us how the poison for arrow tips is obtained from the latex of the ipo tree.

A picture cosmos that keeps us spellbound

The photos of Bruno Manser are a cosmos of their own. If we do not interpret them within the context of «exotic» and try to consider their message in detail instead, we are soon captured by a world that holds us in its spell. Upon closer examination, Bruno's friends become our friends. For some twelve years, Bruno watched as children grew into youth and young people became adults. He visited some of the families over and over again. And if we take time, we can share his friendship with these peaceful people of the forest from a distance.



In this respect, the photos are also a part of the history of the Penan. They document and preserve their way of life as forest nomads, at least in picture. And they illustrate a part of the compulsory forced transition from life as forest nomads to a semi sedentary and finally to a sedentary form of existence.

Looking more closely at these photos that describe the Penan way of life and their closeness to nature, we can also use them as a mirror. As hard as their life might seem from our perspective as «civilised» people, they portray a people who are satisfied and content, a people whom we are unlikely to meet on the highways leading into Zurich. They show us a people who have still mastered a way of life in harmony with nature, but who are increasingly prevented from doing so by a resource-greedy opposing world. They are pictures that can certainly open our eyes.

Erwin Zbinden

News in Brief



Investigation into the case of Kelesau Naan brings no results

Tong Tana has already reported on this. The Penan headman Kelesau Naan disappeared in the rainforest in October 2007. He left no trace and was found dead two months later. As a result of international pressure to determine the cause of death, the government of Sarawak instigated an investigation that was led by the office of the Chief Minister. After exhuming the bones of Kelesau, the police came to the same conclusion as had been reached before the investigation began: Kelesau died of natural causes. A report in the New Straits Times, however, quoted the investigating pathologist who stated that it was difficult to determine the cause of death because not all of the bones were available. Suaram, the Malaysian human rights organisation, has criticised the results of the investigation.

New partner communities in support of the primeval forests

For more than three years, Greenpeace and the Bruno Manser Fonds have been actively helping the administrative offices of municipalities, cantons and the federal government to implement the acquisition of sustainable wood and paper products as part of the urwaldfreundlich.ch project. Due to the re-organisation of the project, Greenpeace and the Bruno Manser Fonds have decided to newly structure their activities in this respect.

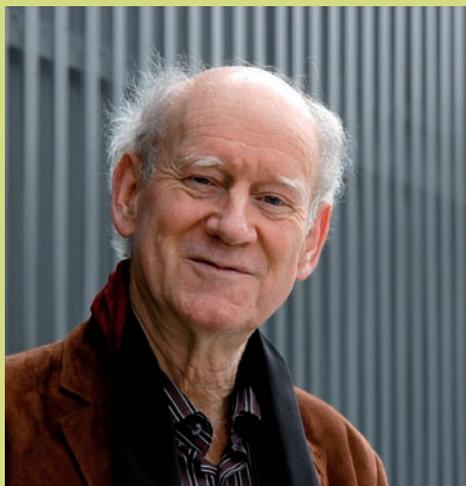
We are pleased to announce that within the context of these changes, the «Förderverein für umweltverträgliche Papiere und Büro-

ökologie» (FUPS) [association for environmentally acceptable paper and office ecology] has become responsible for the coordination of, and assistance to, these communities since the beginning of 2008. The FUPS has been working for 25 years in the area of ecological paper production and the protection of forests and has proven professional competence in this area. Barbara Würmli, Director of FUPS, is the contact person (Tel. +41 71 911 16 30; info@fups.ch). Internet: www.papier.info.

Franz Hohler in support of the Bruno Manser Fonds

Franz Hohler, the Swiss writer and cabaret actor (picture) has called for support for the Bruno Manser Fonds. Hohler has promised to be present in Basel on 19 April 2008 for the vernissage of Bruno Manser's Online Photo Archive. Franz Hohler was a friend of Bruno Manser and participated in Manser's political events in the 1990s. Today he is calling for the support of the Bruno Manser Fonds.

Vernissage: Online Photo Archive of Bruno Manser, with Franz Hohler. Saturday, 19 April 2008, 5:00 p.m. in the Aula of the Naturhistorisches Museum (Museum of Natural History) Basel, Augustinerstrasse 2



The Penan on the middle reaches of the Baram River have been calling attention to the problems they have been encountering with the timber companies Samling and Interhall since the mid 1980's – presently with a blockade at Long Belok (photo). Both of the companies are logging for the second time in the forests of the middle Baram.

Impressum

Tong Tana means «in the forest» in the language of the indigenous Penan living in the rainforest of Sarawak (Malaysia)

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