

REPORT

Kampung Dagat: A Tidung fishing community in Borneo revitalizing *adat* and protecting rivers, wetlands, and forests

Neville Yapp, Hassan Hussin, Hassan Mansah, Marianih Damara, Najib Ramsa, Norita Ramsa, Rajimah Kasran, Rosli Jukrana, Siti Fatimah Abd Hakim, Sulung Bukuruddin, and Mohammad Arju



Ancestral Waters



The ICCA
Consortium



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in Borneo revitalizing *adat*
and protecting rivers,
wetlands, and forests**

We would like to thank everyone in the community of Kampung Dagat for their trust, generosity, and willingness to share their stories, knowledge, and experience as part of the collaborative process of this case study. We also thank all partners and supporters who contributed to making this case study possible. – The Authors

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Contents

Kampung Dagat	6
A village within a living land-sea territory	7
Adat: Living traditions that govern land and water	10
Intersecting threats to land, water, and livelihoods.....	12
Strengthening community governance in a shifting institutional landscape	16
Putting community governance into practice	18
Policy commitments and implementation gaps	20
Unity, solidarity, and support	22
References.....	24

This case study examines how Kampung Dagat has navigated intersecting pressures and how its experience illuminates both the possibilities and the limits of community-led conservation and self-determined development in Sabah.

Kampung Dagat

On the northeastern coast of Borneo, where the Kinabatangan and Segama River delta meets the Sulu Sea, you will find the *kampung*s (villages) of the *U'un Tidung*, the Tidung people. For generations, the Tidung here in the northeast of Malaysia's Sabah state have thrived alongside a diverse array of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, maintaining a culture that cares for this biological corridor that connects the world-famous Danum Valley forest upstream with coastal mangroves in the estuary.

This culturally rich land, shared also by the Suluk, Sungai, Imaan, Bruneians, and communities of Indonesian and Filipino descent, is home to an interplay of fresh, brackish, and marine waters; life here thrives on land and below the water. This is a unique habitat for a variety of wildlife, including the well-known Borneo pygmy elephants, orangutans, hornbills, Irrawaddy and humpback dolphins, green and olive ridley sea turtles, and the flagship fish species of the region, the black snapper (*Lutjanus goldiei*) (Sabah Wildlife Department, 2010).

Kampung Dagat (Dagat Village) is a Tidung community that sits at the confluence of three rivers: the Tabin, the Lower

Segama, and the Maruap. A village of 43 households with almost 250 people, Dagat has a traditional territory that now overlaps with oil palm plantations and two of Malaysia's largest protected areas: the Tabin Wildlife Reserve and the Lower Kinabatangan-Segama Wetlands.

Historical and current land threats from extraction and conservation alike have exerted continued pressure on Kampung Dagat—limiting available land, decimating essential fish stocks, and harming biodiversity vital to the community's sustenance. Faced with such threats, the people of Kampung Dagat have organized collectively to defend their territory, revitalize *adat* (customary law) as a living system of governance, and sustain livelihoods rooted in fisheries, forests, and wetlands. Through community institutions, participatory mapping, citizen science, and the renewal of customary practices, the village has worked to protect its rivers and forests while asserting its right to remain on ancestral land and to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect the community. One of the community's most important origin stories is *Buluh Betung*, which tells of a child born from bamboo and reminds each generation that human life and the forest share one breath.

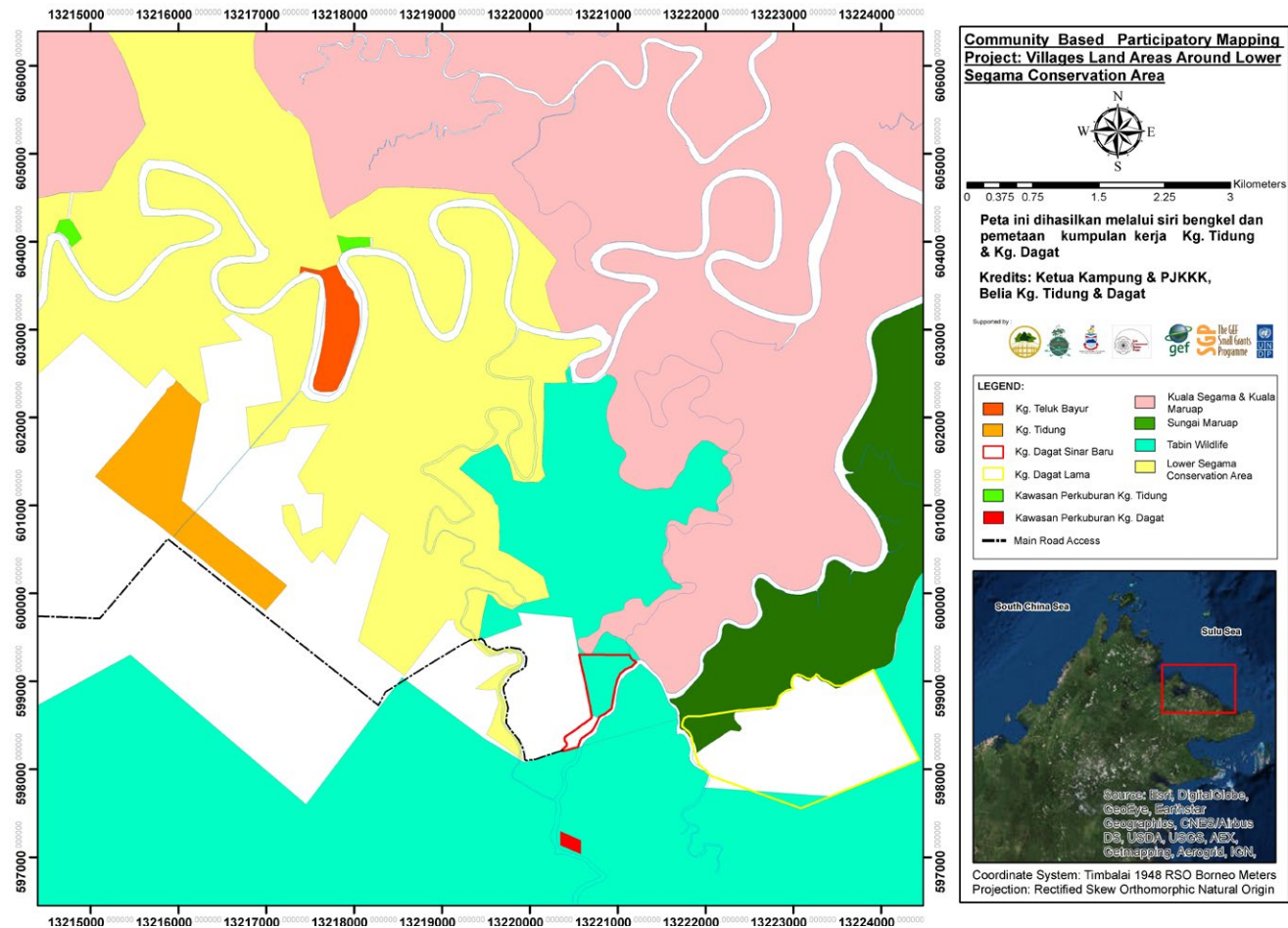
“Over the years, we have been asked to relocate several times . . . but we have refused because this is our home. If we move, nowhere else will allow us to live the way of life we have been accustomed to for generations.”

— Hassan Bin Hussin

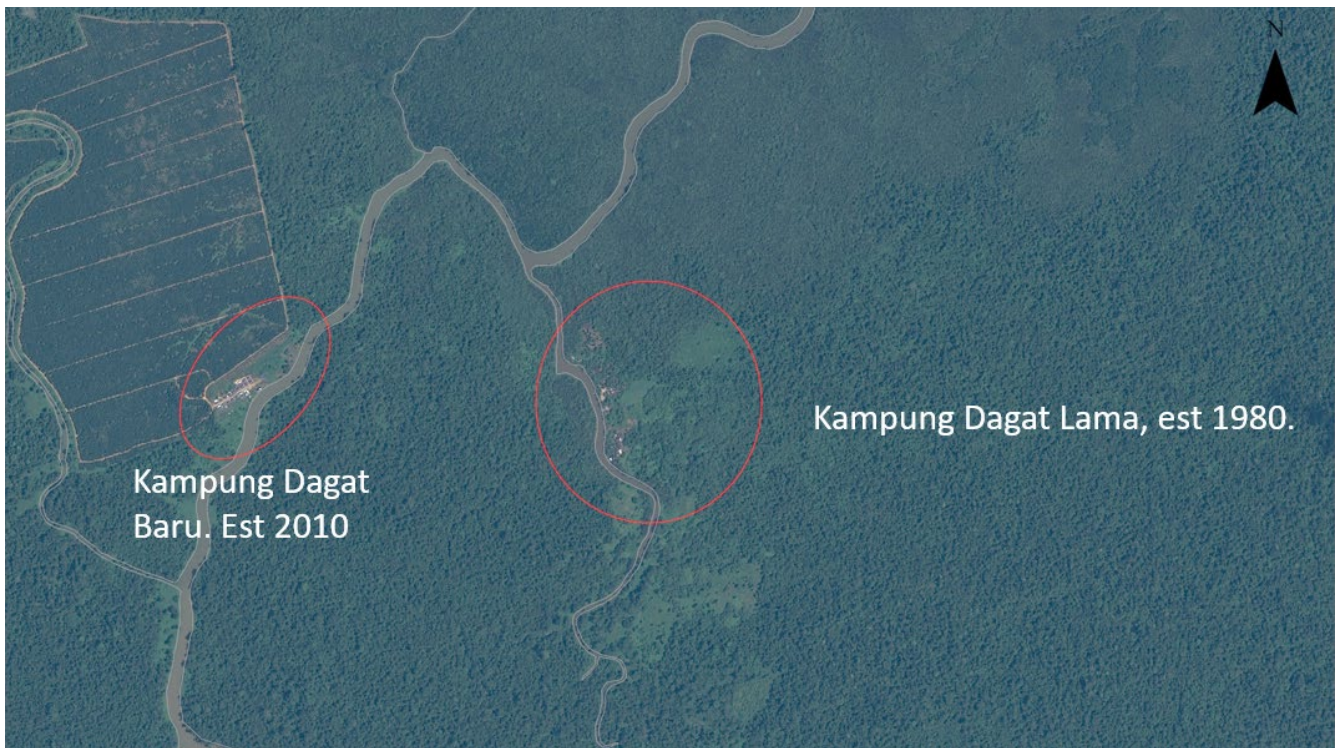
A village within a living land-sea territory

Oral history tells us that the area extending from the Kutai River in what is now Kalimantan to the coastal areas of Sabah bordering Kalimantan is *Tanah Tidung*, the ancestral home of the Tidung people. Kampung Dagat's terrestrial area now covers approximately 259 hectares, including forests and residential areas. In addition, the village shares

around 450 square kilometers of fishing areas in the Segama estuary with two neighboring villages: Kampung Tidung and Kampung Maruap. The village comprises 6 hectares of housing, a legally gazetted native reserve of 30 hectares, and a 222-hectare customary forest that includes a cemetery and fruit orchards.



Community map of Kampung Dagat and surrounding areas (including PJKKK, Kampung Tidung, and Kampung Dagat). The landscape shown represents the traditional territory of the Tidung people, illustrating its overlaps with protected areas and other land-use designations.



Village of Dagat: The new settlement (left) and the old settlement (right).

The customary forest area was declared in 2018 by villagers following efforts to prevent the renewal of a logging license and to conserve the forests that sustain wildlife populations. Villagers are conserving the forest through sustainable-use protocols and orangutan protection rules, which bar hunting and tree cutting while encouraging the planting of fruit trees for orangutan consumption. Teams of women and youth study resident orangutan populations, conduct phenological studies of plants, establish nature trails, and responsibly collect non-timber forest products. The community continues to preserve and sustainably harvest fish, prawns, and forest resources and to share them across all households in the village.

The two *musim angin* (seasonal winds) bring rain showers year-round, with average temperatures ranging from 29 to 33 degrees Celsius. The community adapts to these changes and embraces seasonal flooding. The period from October to February marks the *musim angin utara* (northern wind season), which brings wetter and cooler months. As the Northeast Monsoon brings heavy rain to the region, giant freshwater prawns (*Macrobrachium rosenbergii*) swim from upstream through the flooded river by the village. This peak harvesting season sees fishers using rattan traps in the river.

Fishing is the way of life here—about 45 fishers, both men and women, all using wooden boats with outboard engines. The primary fishing gear includes rattan prawn traps, hooks and lines, gillnets, and cast nets. The methods, targets, and locations of fishing, as well as life in this hot and humid village, are deeply connected to the region’s tropical monsoon climate.

As the flooding recedes, shrimp move farther into the brackish-water estuary to spawn. Wind directions shift to the southwest, marking the *musim angin selatan* (southern wind season), which brings hotter, drier months with less rainfall. River flow decreases, alongside reduced wind and increased saltwater intrusion into intertidal and freshwater

areas. White shrimp from the coastal seas swim with the Southwest Monsoon toward the estuary and upstream rivers in Dagat. For fishers, this is the time to change gear and use cast nets for white shrimp in the rivers and estuary, and gillnets, hooks, and lines for finfish such as snapper, sea bass, and grouper in the estuary and coastal seas.

Whatever the seasons or climate, villagers don't fish during the full moon or the new moon, when some fish and crustaceans spawn and the larvae travel into nutrient-rich creeks pushed by high tides.

In addition to fish and crustaceans, diverse wild

foods such as leafy greens, roots, and vegetables are significant parts of the diet around the seasons. Although rice is part of regular meals, the community can no longer cultivate paddy rice because farmland has been lost to salinity and oil palm plantations, and elephants frequently damage fields. Villagers usually do not hunt terrestrial wildlife, as they do not eat such wild meat except for deer, which are selectively hunted for communal feasts on the occasion of wedding ceremonies, funeral gatherings, and two major religious festivals, Eid al-Fitr and Qurban. Overall, subsistence gardening and foraging for wild foods remain essential for food security in Dagat.

“ The flooding season is highly anticipated as our families begin harvesting forest resources in accordance with our customs and beliefs to keep us safe when entering the forest. We harvest rattan and other materials sustainably to make prawn traps in preparation for the flooding season. During the dry season, the spring tides enable our mothers and sisters to enjoy the thrills of hooks and lines, catching threadfin, and casting nets to catch shrimp for drying when saltwater enters our village. ”

— *Rajimah Kasran*



Nearly a third of the village is of school-going age, yet it remains without a school. Parents must organize carpools to transport their children to classes in the neighboring community. Photo: Mohammad Arju

Adat: Living traditions that govern land and water

“ I was born here and went fishing with my mother as early as 3 years old; regardless of gender, we all go fishing and enter the forest. We owe our older generations for their efforts in teaching us the way of life. There is nowhere else we would rather call home than Kampung Dagat, its surrounding forest, and its rivers. ”

— Norita Ramsa

The way Kampung Dagat has adapted over generations in this ecosystem sets the community apart from other Tidung communities in the region. The community primarily sees itself as a water-and-land community whose history, spirituality, and livelihoods are braided into Sabah's large river estuaries. Islam is the majority faith, embraced since the era of the Tidung sultanates in the 17th century (Sabah Wildlife Department, 2006). In Tidung territory, Islam is syncretic, merged with local traditions and manifested through adat (customary law and tradition), which expresses reciprocity with the revered natural world, anchors social norms, and reinforces environmental restraint.

Dagat's territory has been governed for generations through adat and rituals that maintain social harmony and respect for the land. The foundation of adat lies in reverence for the spirits of the forest. Adat provides a moral compass and a practical framework for how people relate to their territories, rivers, forests, and each other. The village continues to observe taboos against overexploiting nature's bounty and perform annual rituals at sacred places, such as thanksgiving rites for a bountiful harvest. Among several mantras recited is this:

“
*Tanduin kai kio adu aki. Taka
sempagun sentanah gitu.
Longkupu muli gitu.
Ga sino anu guang angacau
damon, jagain kai kio. Mai subon
angacau damon.*”

“Know us, dear grandfather and grandmother. We are one land and one place; these are your grandchildren. Please keep us safe from harm and from those with ill intent. ”

These practices, maintained in harmony with the teachings of Islam, reinforce community cohesion and respect for natural limits, sustain unity and mutual care, and ensure that the entire community carries out its spiritual obligations. Together, adat and Islam weave an ethical and practical framework that sustains Dagat's way of life. The village asserts its right to rituals and ceremonies, maintaining that these practices are the main reasons it remains safe from harm.



<https://youtu.be/0I9A9xkNZTg?si=XJ7V5u7OKavjX-WY>

This documentary, titled PANTANG, illustrates how adat serves as a living system of governance, preventing calamities and ensuring balance with the environment (Borneo Eco Film Festival [BEFF], 2017).

Access to traditional forest resources—such as rattan for rituals, Nipah leaves for roofing, timber for boats and houses, and wild vegetables—has also become more restricted. These changes affect not only livelihoods but also the ability to maintain cultural practices tied to natural resources.

Farming, once very important to the Tidung way of life and dating back to their first settlement in Teluk Bayur, has now become difficult due to shrinking land availability. At the same time, upstream land-use changes have reduced water quality. Despite a wide range of challenges to cultivating the land, the community continues to value farming deeply and aspires to revive it as part of a diversified livelihood system.

“

Our people have lived here for generations and continue to practice our traditional knowledge, to take what is sufficient and leave something for tomorrow. Up until now, our young people have continued to practice this belief. We want our younger generation to appreciate this place as we have. This is one of our motivations. We also want our younger generation to succeed outside of our village and return here to contribute. We want our young people to always remember the struggles and hardships faced in the past and our culture, which will serve as a source of motivation and drive so that the adat and culture of the Tidung People do not disappear.

”

— *Hassan Mansah*

While adat continues to guide daily life and collective responsibility in Kampung Dagat, the land and waters that sustain these practices have been steadily reshaped by forces beyond the village. Changes in land tenure, river systems, and surrounding landscapes have reduced the community's ability to access and manage key areas according to customary rules. As forests have been logged, plantations expanded, and new forms of territorial control imposed, the material and spiritual foundations of adat have come under increasing strain.

Intersecting threats to land, water, and livelihoods

Many of the ecological and economic threats the Tidung People in the region now face stem from the logging boom of the 1960s, when large-scale timber extraction was prioritized as a driver of regional economic growth. These developments, combined with gaps in land governance, contributed to the loss of collective land ownership by villagers through land sales that ignored customary practices (Barlow, 2014; Butler, 2012).

The main drivers were state-issued timber concessions and the logging firms that operated them. Large-scale felling upstream from the village accelerated erosion and altered flood patterns, while the industry opened land markets in which customary plots were sold at below-market prices (Douglas, 1999; SUHAKAM, 2013). Plantation companies holding long-term oil-palm leases consolidated much of the cleared land, maintaining drainage canals that continue to release sediment and agrochemicals into the Segama River (Nainar et al., 2017). The accumulated wealth from these activities was never reinvested in local development.

In 1997, logging camps across Sabah began to close as forests were exhausted and cleared, and rivers were polluted. That year, the region experienced the worst drought, wildfires, and devastating floods to date. In the same year, Sabah passed its Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997, strengthening more restrictive conservation approaches to wildlife conservation in protected areas such as Tabin Wildlife Reserve and Sungai Maruap Protection Forest, further limiting villagers' access to their traditional territories (Bulan, 2021).

Contemporary economic challenges add to these historical threats: lack of road access restricts access to markets, health clinics, and schools, and the cost of fuel oil absorbs a significant share of household income because Dagat has had limited inclusion in formal planning processes by state and federal agencies, resulting in a lack of electricity from the national grid. Inadequate infrastructure continues to restrict development opportunities, leaving households dependent on diesel generators and costly transport.

Historically, Dagat's economy combined rice farming, fishing, and the use of forest resources. However, large-scale logging in the 1960s–70s and the rapid expansion of oil palm plantations caused major ecological shifts—fragmenting habitats, degrading soils, and displacing wildlife into community lands.

Household surveys conducted by the community association show that around 51% of women and girls and 49% of men and boys are employed, but women are underrepresented in wage employment. Nearly two-thirds of residents are under thirty-five, with one in three still of school-going age. Forest produce on a small scale, farming of edible birds' nests, and occasional guiding for wildlife tourism provide supplementary cash income. A handful of residents hold salaried jobs, typically as teachers' aides or seasonal wage-laborers. Some youths temporarily migrate for part-time employment in palm oil plantations, sending modest remittances home. Economically, Dagat sits well below Malaysia's rural poverty line (DOSM, 2024).

A recent livelihood assessment found an average cash income of about MYR 1,765 per household per month—barely above subsistence level and heavily skewed by a few larger prawn harvests. In months with poor harvests, household incomes fall to MYR 1,200, and energy costs amplify hardship; every household spends three times as much as average city families on fuel. These outlays swallow a quarter to a third of gross fishing revenue, leaving net returns of only a few hundred ringgit.

One of the most persistent challenges is the lack of formal recognition and support for small-scale artisanal fishers. Despite their vital role in food security and poverty alleviation, artisanal fisheries are not recognized or integrated into state policies.

In Sabah, in the eyes of the state, the inshore artisanal fishery remains under-recognized in formal systems.

The Department of Fisheries has yet to include the fishing boats in Dagat in its official statistics or issue boat registration and licenses to fishers. Community-based monitoring shows that Kampung Dagat records 10 to 12 tons of prawns and about 5 tons of fish annually. Yet these contributions are not reflected in official records, resulting in a significant underestimation of their activities and their exclusion from federal and state benefits like fuel subsidies, training, and infrastructure support.

This lack of visibility for artisanal fisheries is compounded by pressures such as state-subsidized trawlers entering estuaries and damaging habitats. Bottom trawling in rivers has been decimating prawn populations. Decades of trawler incursions have degraded overall fish populations. Annual catches of giant freshwater prawns have declined from around 20 tons in 2006 to 10–12 tons today, while prices have tripled (Yapp, unpublished). Better-capitalized outsiders, including opportunistic commercial trawlers, illegally enter and remove prawn and fish biomass at a scale that undermines small-scale catches, leading to the local extinction of the largemouth sawfish (*Pristis pristis*) and the Borneo river shark (*Glyphis fowlerae*), and threatening the Irrawaddy and humpback dolphin populations in the area (Sabah Wildlife Department, 2010).

Less formal but equally disruptive actors include itinerant poison-fishers and small, unlicensed trawl crews that exploit weak on-river enforcement, as well as land brokers who have manipulated communities into handing over power of attorney to represent villages en masse for land application processes and have taken away the villages' customary land (SUHAKAM, 2013).

The Lahad Datu incursion of 2013, a conflict close to Kampung Dagat in which a militant faction claiming ties to the Sultanate of Sulu and North Borneo attempted to seize the area, disrupted the village's emerging eco-tourism sector and triggered outward migration (Anom et al., 2015). Many young people continue to leave in search of jobs and education, weakening

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Our challenge with the government concerns land ownership. We have applied for several areas of land that have been inherited and used from generation to generation, but these applications have not been approved by the Land and Survey Department. In 2024, we were surprised to learn that some of the land we had applied for was already owned by others, including people who were not originally from Kampung Dagat. In addition, the government—especially the Sabah Forestry Department—is increasingly aware of the importance of involving communities in planning and decision-making, since we are living adjacent to protected areas.

”

— *Najib Ramsa*

local governance and threatening the transmission of ecological and cultural knowledge.

At the same time, access to local markets has narrowed. Estate shops and facilities that once allowed villagers to sell their products have been closed to them since the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing them to rely on distant towns and raising household costs.

Effectively communicating and articulating the community's conservation and sustainability efforts remains challenging. Valuable initiatives—such as sustainable fisheries practices, traditional resource management, and community-led biodiversity conservation—are often inadequately documented or recognized externally. This limits the community's ability to secure critical external support and broader recognition needed to sustain their efforts.

But above all, for the community, securing rights to homes and ancestral lands is the most pressing concern. Today, Dagat is bordered by oil palm estates on the west and surrounded by protected areas. Land administration processes have often been complex and challenging for rural communities to navigate, leading

to misunderstandings and uncertainty. These systemic challenges have left villagers vulnerable to dispossession and have made long-term planning and secure governance of their territory more difficult, particularly amid shifting policies and evolving institutional frameworks.

Climate change amplifies existing challenges. Increased flooding, shifting rainfall, and changes in river salinity disrupt fish spawning cycles, directly affecting food security and incomes. These shifts also complicate the timing of traditional practices such as rattan harvesting, making it harder to sustain rituals and ecological rhythms linked to adat.



The region's tropical monsoon climate serves as the primary architect of local life, dictating the seasonal targets, techniques, and locations of the village's fishing trade. Approximately 45 men and women sustain their community through traditional fishing. Photo: Mohammad Arju



Fishing gear includes rattan prawn traps, hooks and lines, gillnets, and cast nets—all operated from outboard-powered wooden boats. Photos: Mohammad Arju

Strengthening community governance in a shifting institutional landscape

Over successive generations, Tidung ancestors followed the great arterial rivers from the Labuk estuary to the mouth of the Segama River. They established Kampung Tidung (Teluk Bayur) in 1952 on the main Segama River. Finally, after a series of catastrophic floods in the 1970s and 80s, most of the families led by *Allahyarham* (the late) Aji Bin Salleh moved to higher ground to Dagat on the Tabin River in 1980, where the village stands today. Several groups of the original inhabitants of Tidung moved again in 1997 to access roads and schools, and established Kampung Parit.

Today, the descendants of Kampung Tidung (Teluk Bayur) are split into two villages: Kampung Dagat and Kampung Tidung. Ironwood-carved graves mark evidence of their ancestors along the Segama and Tabin rivers. Family photo albums from the 1960s and 1970s speak to how

they lived in Teluk Bayur, with expansive rice fields and vibrant life — a landscape that has changed dramatically.

Kampung Dagat's governance system has undergone dramatic changes since the village's formal establishment in 1980. The first formal village head and founder, Allahyarham Aji Bin Salleh, played a central role in preserving customary practices, land matters, and marriages; resolving disputes; and sustaining the community's cultural heritage, ensuring it is passed down to future generations. Since 1994, village heads have been appointed by the government for fixed terms. In addition, the government created a new leadership structure, the Village Development Committee (*Jawatankuasa Kemajuan Kampung* or JKKK), led by a chairman elected by the local government. At the national level, the Federal Constitution of Malaysia leaves recognition of native customary rights

“

We, the Tidung community, are proud of our traditional way of life and culture. We still catch shrimp and fish in the river, and we still pick rattan and practice traditional hunting activities to meet our living needs. Realizing that natural resources are dwindling and many youths are migrating to the city, while our elders are dying one by one, we are learning how to continue our traditions, defend economic resources, work on other alternative livelihoods when other sources of livelihood have declined, such as eco-tourism, and learn to explore new livelihoods, like swiftlet farming, to defend our identity and culture as the Tidung Tribe in Kampung Dagat, at the same time supporting global aspirations towards biodiversity conservation and combating climate change.

”

— *Norita Ramsa*

to state law. In Sabah, those rights are recognized under the Sabah Land Ordinance, but implementation has faced long-standing administrative challenges and issues of consistency and transparency (SUHAKAM, 2013).

Recognizing the gaps and limitations in the governance regime, the village community began to self-organize around sustaining their territory. Since 2015, the village has implemented a series of practical measures, each designed to improve knowledge, build capacity, and engage people outside the village to build resilience. A community association, *Persatuan Komuniti Kampung Dagat*, was formed in 2016 and later registered with the Registrar of Societies. The association is a gender-inclusive platform that supports and advances village goals, coordinates fisheries, tourism, renewable energy, and forest initiatives, and maintains formal correspondence with government agencies.

Women, once excluded from decision-making, are increasingly playing greater roles in areas such as homestay programs and food initiatives. However, full inclusion remains a work in progress, and gender-related social barriers continue to slow progress.

The people of Dagat have articulated a shared framework for what effective community governance looks like in practice. For the village, success depends on advancing four interlinked priorities through both customary institutions and formal engagement with external authorities.

The first priority is legal security of native customary rights, pursued through multiple advocacy pathways to strengthen the community's role in the co-management of protected and conserved areas. The second is ecological recovery, defined in locally meaningful terms—particularly stabilizing fish and prawn stocks through community-based management and conservation of endangered marine species. The third is economic resilience built on diversified livelihoods, renewable energy, improved

market access, and dignified sources of income that reduce dependence on a single resource. The final element is cultural continuity, expressed through Indigenous language use, ritual practice, and the strengthening of local leadership, ensuring that governance is grounded in adat and community values.

In the short term, the community has prioritized securing land tenure alongside access to basic services such as roads, clean water, and electricity. Building on data and experience gained through community monitoring and documentation, the village is also working to present clear evidence—including catch records and fisheries value—to neighboring villages and government agencies to support recognition and collaboration.

In the long term, Dagat envisions itself as a formally recognized adat territory where culture, environment, and livelihoods are sustained together. This vision includes reviving agriculture alongside fisheries and forest-based livelihoods, provided land security and coexistence with wildlife can be assured. Above all, Dagat seeks to ensure that future generations inherit not only land and resources, but also the values of adat, the teachings of Islam, and the spirit of resilience that has enabled the community to adapt and endure.



Foraging for seasonal wild foods like leafy greens, roots, and vegetables remains essential for food security in Dagat. Photo: Mohammad Arju

Putting community governance into practice

Since 2016, Kampung Dagat has been deeply involved in mapping its ancestral territories, documenting customary practices, developing local protocols for resource management, and building youth leadership and citizen science skills.

In collaboration with local nonprofit LEAP Spiral, a youth-elder team used handheld GPS units to record settlement history, sacred sites, fishing grounds, and forest resources. The resulting georeferenced map has since been used to support ongoing management and advocacy efforts, including submission to Sabah's Land and Survey and Forestry Departments. The village has a cohort of community filmmakers to advocate for its causes. Since 2017, several short films have been produced through networking with other like-minded IPLCs in Sabah (Yapp, 2019).

To maintain cultural and sustainable-use rights to its forest, Kampung Dagat has adopted collaborative approaches to forest management with the protected areas that now surround it. This includes advocating for shared governance and co-management of forests and fisheries, particularly in relation to Tabin Wildlife Reserve and the Lower Kinabatangan Segama Wetlands. In 2018, the village contributed its community maps to the revision of the Tabin Management Plan, and village participation strengthened the revised 2019 plan to ensure sustainable and wise use of natural resources (Sabah Forestry Department, 2021).

Since 2020, Kampung Dagat has implemented catch records for all fishers to support long-term monitoring and build knowledge and experience, following the globally recognized Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) approach (Rosendo, 2020). A trained youth team logs daily catch weights, gear types, and related data using Open Data Kit tools. The association also works with the neighboring Maruap and Tidung villages to develop mutually agreed fisheries management protocols, identify key target species, and study annual trends.

In 2022, Kampung Dagat launched its first renewable energy project to produce ice blocks for fishers and diversify seafood processing. The 5.4 kW solar array and ice machine are managed by a 12-member women's

The community also takes proactive measures against illegal fishing activities, especially bottom trawling by outside operators. Youth groups work with village leaders to protect critical spawning grounds by blocking sensitive river channels from illegal exploitation and the use of poison. In 2020, residents established a volunteer ranger unit that now patrols and maintains the village's 222-hectare forest.

group, which handles all operations. The group is currently upgrading the facility to 30 kW, aiming to produce up to 30 tons of ice per year, supported by UNDP Malaysia's Green and Resilient Recovery (GRR) Local Action Grant (Sabah RE2 Consortium, 2025).

The women's group is also trying to revive the community-based homestay tourism program (originally established in 2006), which is facing challenges due to continued travel advisories issued by states since the Lahad Datu military intrusion; tourist numbers have dropped significantly since tour operators abandoned the area.

Kampung Dagat is an active member of the Ramsar Community Group 8, a coalition of eight Segama-Kinabatangan villages that meets annually to share experience and coordinate wetlands management efforts. The village also partners with the Forever Sabah-led "Sabah RE2 Consortium" to expand renewable energy access and continues to work closely with local NGO LEAP-Spiral to strengthen its village institution. Community members also participated in the first State Conference on Community-Based Marine Resource Management (Mopilin, 2023).

“

In defending our traditional territory, the challenges are compounded by our limited economic status and compounded by a low level of education and skills. Regardless, we continue to endeavor to defend our territory by organizing our communities, learning from our elders, and establishing protocols for how we manage our resources.

”

— *Rajimah Kasran*

From the margins of Sabah's development landscape, Kampung Dagat seeks to sustain the web that connects nature with its way of life, its connection to ancestral lands, and its collective rights as Indigenous people. While many rural villages in the region have been abandoned in recent decades, pressured by development, land insecurity, and

weakening customary institutions, Dagat has endured. The community has consistently resisted relocation schemes and has chosen to remain rooted where its ancestors are buried. For the village, sustaining territory is not just about securing land tenure, but also about defending dignity, cultural continuity, and the right to remain.



Traditional daily dishes are mostly prepared with fish, crustaceans, and wild leafy greens, with homestead-raised chickens occasionally added to the meal. Photo: Mohammad Arju

Policy commitments and implementation gaps

Since the Durban World Parks Congress of 2003, international policy frameworks have increasingly recognized Indigenous and community rights to land, with these commitments gradually being reflected in Sabah's policy landscape. References to ICCAs (territories of life) in Sabah's First Biodiversity Strategy and its National Policy on Biodiversity represented a landmark moment for Indigenous community recognition (Sabah Biodiversity Centre, 2012). However, implementation of community-conserved areas has been slow. Much of the historical context around land administration and resource management remains poorly documented or acknowledged, including historical resource governance decisions that have had lasting impacts on villages like Dagat. So far, no community in Sabah has completed the state recognition process as an ICCA. Coordination across agencies remains a challenge in their engagement with communities.

However, many communities continue to assert their rights and self-declare their territories and resources under the term Indigenous and Traditional Territories (ITTs), which has gained significant recognition within the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), particularly following the adoption of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) at COP15 in December 2022. This terminology reflects a growing emphasis on recognizing, respecting, and securing the land tenure

rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) as stewards of biodiversity.

Locally, a handful of government officers have begun to treat Kampung Dagat's citizen-science catch data and participatory maps as legitimate management inputs, and the village association is occasionally invited to participate in planning processes. For example, District Forestry officers responsible for the Kinabatangan Ramsar buffer zone informally accepted the village's participatory maps in its revision of the site's management plan and the recent efforts to nominate Tabin Wildlife Reserve for the IUCN Green List.

Outstanding administrative and enforcement issues continue to impact Dagat's territorial security. The Sabah Lands and Surveys Department has yet to process the communal title application for Kampung Dagat's 222-hectare reserve forest, first filed and supported by the district LUC committee in 2018; in 2024, the community discovered that two lots in the same area had already been alienated to private individuals from outside Dagat. State protected area boundaries have expanded to engulf ancestral grave sites, limiting community access. And though estuarine trawl licenses are no longer issued by the Fisheries Department, the village is still highly cautious of opportunistic trawlers who continue to deploy their nets illegally within the area. Road, health, and energy planning remain focused on larger population centers, leaving villages like Dagat marginalized.

“Government bodies and outside agencies need to communicate with the community to resolve all related issues—or to prevent and minimize conflict—by developing community protocols or amending existing laws so that situations can be managed more effectively. At times, the government does not understand and value customary practices as part of its cultural identity. For this reason, more communication is required between the government and the village, and the same applies to NGOs and other external agencies.”

— *Rajimah Kasran*

While regulatory silos, commercial fishing interests, and unresolved land allocations continue to undercut Dagat's sustaining efforts, change is slow but happening. A small but growing circle of government officials and socially-minded businesses works with the community. Since the establishment of the community association, Kampung Dagat has developed a coordinated, community-led stewardship model, grounded in long-term partnerships with national and international CSOs, NGOs, and social businesses.

Private sector engagement remains limited. Most interaction with large businesses has taken the form of small philanthropic contributions, and local oil palm estates and other nearby industries are generally unaware of, or disengaged from, Dagat's territorial and governance priorities. Ecotourism operators in the area have not formalized longer-term partnerships, leaving engagement largely transactional rather than integrated into community-led development and conservation strategies. Otter trawl owners and commercial fishing entities from outside the village are the leading oppositional actors in the territory, largely due to weak enforcement of fisheries regulations. Consequently, over the last 20 years, the

village's fishers have occasionally taken matters into their own hands by dismantling nets, confronting trawlers, and cutting trawls, raising serious safety concerns and sparking conflicts with fishers from outside the village.

Civil society and research bodies have generally played a constructive role, but repeated short-term studies and project engagement have contributed to research fatigue. Communal harm done by the designation of the Lower Segama Conservation Area in neighboring Kampung Tidung has also shaped wary perceptions of protected areas (Yapp, 2019).

Community leadership believes that there is an opportunity to strengthen formal support and institutional follow-through by legally recognizing adat territories and integrating community-led data and initiatives directly into policymaking and land management plans. Relevant agencies must prioritize the processing of communal land titles, uphold local environmental protocols against commercial interests, and ensure that the recognition of rights is accompanied by essential infrastructure and direct developmental support.

Unity, solidarity, and support

Despite significant constraints, Kampung Dagat's demographic profile carries important strengths: a predominantly young population, deep ecological knowledge, and a cohesive social fabric. Several recent developments have also made aspects of community self-strengthening more feasible.

At the state level, the Sabah Biodiversity Strategy 2024–2034, Malaysia's 30x30 commitment, and the new OECM guidelines formally require community participation in conservation and resource management (Sabah Biodiversity Centre, 2024). Together, these policy signals have opened potential pathways for Dagat's efforts to be recognized, particularly through the collaborative management of protected areas within and nearby its territory.

Technical and organizational backing comes from a close network of civil society partners. LEAP Spiral mentors community members in village planning, advocacy, and fundraising, helps strengthen community institutions, and supports the documentation of customary practices and the development of citizen-science programs (LEAP Spiral, 2024). Other civil society partners in Sabah work with Dagat to advance renewable energy initiatives, while broader networks of IPLCs provide solidarity and shared momentum toward the recognition of ICCAs and other community-conserved approaches in the state.

Across the village, unity around territorial integrity is strong, though it has been built piece by piece. Early on, existing power dynamics and internal struggles created tensions, which were gradually addressed through facilitated dialogue and mutual respect among households, building mutual understanding, shared beliefs, and aspirations. The community has survived because of this unity; every household depends on the others to face everyday challenges. This cohesion is reflected in the community's consistent momentum, sustained through monthly meetings (*musyawarah*) over the last several years. While political appointments can still create momentary factionalism—particularly with each change of village leadership—Dagat's community association has emerged as a recognized, neutral space where appointed leaders, hereditary elders, and elected committee members deliberate together. Unity remains

high because the struggle is shared, and differing values are channeled through standing rules that require generational and gender balance in both discussion and implementation.

“

We need to defend the foundation created by our ancestors; they taught us how to live in hardship, without lights or electricity, and yet we have survived to this day. They have sacrificed a lot for us. This is our 'house' and has been since forever, even before we were born.

”

— *Mama Idan*

Adaptation has long been embedded in Kampung Dagat's traditional practices. Following relocation, families adapted to land use pressures by making fishing central to their survival, complemented by more limited farming and forest use. As landscapes changed and pressures mounted, the same adaptive mindset that guided fisheries management was extended to other aspects of community life. The community studied land laws and administrative processes with local partners, enabling them to legally secure 30 hectares of native land and prevent the renewal of a logging license. They have continued to protect their territorial rights to their 222 hectare communal forest reserve.

The community has developed economic resilience by adjusting livelihoods to changing seasonal cycles and diversifying income sources through tourism, as well as pursuing renewable energy projects and ice production to reduce dependence on diesel fuel. And at the same time, advocacy is becoming a central strategy to cultural preservation; just as traditional fishing relies on oral

knowledge, Dagat has embraced *Suara* community filmmaking to tell its story, blending new tools with its identity as an Indigenous Tidung community.

Looking ahead, sustaining momentum is central to Kampung Dagat's long-term survival and self-determina-

tion, particularly given the village's young population. Alongside continued advocacy and territorial defense, the community is exploring practical pathways to strengthen everyday resilience, including improving water security, health access, and household productivity projects like a village tree nursery.



Playful moments in Kampung Dagat: A child wears a traditional rattan prawn trap, a common tool used by the village's artisanal fishers. Photo: Najib Ramsa

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About LEAP Spiral

LEAP Spiral (an ICCA Consortium member) is a Malaysia-based nonprofit organization that supports communities and partners to strengthen local stewardship, sustainable livelihoods, and community-led conservation. LEAP's work focuses on linking people, place, and long-term resilience.

www.leapspiral.org

About the ICCA Consortium

The ICCA Consortium is a global nonprofit association supporting Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in governing and conserving their territories of life. Its members in more than eighty countries are undertaking collective action at the local, national, regional, and international levels across several thematic streams. These include documenting, sustaining, and defending territories of life, as well as fostering youth and intergenerational relations.

www.iccaconsortium.org



At dusk in Kampung Dagat, young boys and girls make the most of the fading light to play on the village's only street.
Photo: Mohammad Arju



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