



29 SEP, 2026

IDS,3H Coalition workshop seeks nature-friendly road planning

Borneo Post (KK), Malaysia



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KOTA KINABALU: The importance of integrating scientific evidence and biodiversity considerations into road infrastructure planning from the earliest stages was highlighted at a recently held workshop organised by the Institute for Development Studies (Sabah) (IDS) and the Humans, Habitats and Highways (3H) Coalition.

The one-day workshop brought together almost 60 participants from government agencies, research institutions and civil society organisations to examine how data and information could better inform infrastructure planning and decision-making.

Jointly organised by IDS and 10 civil society organisations under the 3H Coalition, the workshop focused on identifying gaps in existing planning processes and exploring ways to ensure relevant information reaches stakeholders before road alignments, designs and budgets are finalised.

IDS chief executive officer Datuk Ts Dr Ramzah Dambul highlighted the importance of bringing different sectors together to strengthen the use of evidence in infrastructure planning.

Key government agencies, including the State Economic Planning Unit (UPEN), Sabah Maju Jaya Secretariat (SSMJ), Environment Protection Department (EPD), Lands and Surveys Department (JTU) and Sabah Forestry Department (SFD), shared their perspectives, experiences and challenges in infrastructure planning.

The exchange provided participants with a better understanding of practical constraints at different stages of planning and how information could contribute more effectively to decision-making.

Forever Sabah chief executive facilitator Cynthia Ong said

civil society organisations were keen to understand how their evidence could contribute more effectively during the planning stage.

"We want to understand how the information and evidence that we have rigorously collected can contribute during the planning stage, not only when the budget and design have already been set," she said.

Ong also reflected on years of engagement surrounding the Pan Borneo Highway, including efforts to prevent Tawai Forest Reserve from being affected by highway development.

Although those efforts were unsuccessful, Prof Benoit Goossens of Cardiff University and Director of Danau Girang Field Centre said lessons from Tawai could still be applied to other areas.

"It is not too late for the Kalabakan-Maliau stretch for Phase 3. We were informed that the alignment and budget have not yet been finalised, so there is still time to engage with planners, contractors and their consultants to explore how the road can better respect both nature and people, and this is what we hope to do," he said.

Meanwhile, Universiti Malaysia Sabah senior lecturer and Seratu Aatai director Dr Nurzhafarina Othman said a project commissioned to Seratu Aatai and Danau Girang Field Centre, with support from Yayasan Hasanah and the Ministry of Finance, provided an opportunity to study elephant movement and habitat use before and during highway construction in Tawai.

"Movement data showed that the three elephants we were monitoring — one male and two females — moved out of the area during the early stages of construction. We also identified several areas of concentrated elephant activity that overlap

with the highway alignment," she said.

She said the findings had provided practical information that could be shared with those involved in the highway project.

"For example, we have advised that guardrails should not be installed at certain locations where they could impede elephant movement, particularly for calves. This is exactly why information needs to reach planners and engineers while there is still an opportunity to act on it," she added.

WWF-Malaysia's Dr Cheryl Cheah highlighted that existing knowledge, scientific research and guidelines could help inform the construction of wildlife-friendly road infrastructure in Sabah.

These include the 'Handbook to Mitigate the Impacts of Roads and Railways on Asian Elephants', developed by the IUCN WCPA/SSC Asian Elephant Transport Working Group.

The workshop aims to develop practical recommendations on when, where and how scientific evidence can be incorporated into linear infrastructure planning in Sabah, particularly to ensure it is introduced early enough to influence critical decisions.

Nurzhafarina said the discussion extended beyond individual road projects to Sabah's broader development direction.

"If Sabah wants to advance a greener development agenda, we need policies and strategies that bring development and biodiversity together from the beginning. We cannot continue to consider biodiversity only after the alignment, design and budget have been decided," she said.



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Participants pose for a group photo after the event.



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SUMMARIES

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