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**SUNGAI TEKAI INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS ON
PRESERVING THE ENVIRONMENT WITH REGARD TO
HEALTH CONCERNS**

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Abstract

The concept of preservation of the environment, specifically in relation to health concerns, among indigenous people is still unsatisfactory due to the lack of methods or tools needed to accomplish this aim. This is especially so among the indigenous people living in the Sungai Tekai area which is located in Pahang, a state with a considerable indigenous population in Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to uncover the perceptions of the Sungai Tekai indigenous people on the importance of preservation of the environment. Using a qualitative approach, this study was conducted via observations and interviews from June-August, 2018. The respondents for this study were selected by simple random sampling. The findings revealed that some form of education needs to be implemented for Sungai Tekai indigenous people to protect their environment in order to improve their health status. It appears that using both formal and non-formal approaches, environmental education, with a specific focus on health, should be implemented among this community from an early age to ensure a healthy and vibrant community.

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Keywords: Sungai Tekai indigenous people, public health, conservation of environment.



1. Introduction

The indigenous people in Malaysia can be divided into three main groups derived from the 19 tribes (Juli Edo, 2010), each with its own identity and attitudes. The community is divided according to physical appearance, language and customs practiced (Harun & Hamid, 2010). Indigenous people occupy almost 22% of the land surface worldwide but affect nearly 80% of the earth's biodiversity. Indigenous peoples occupy areas as diverse as America, the Amazon, as well as Africa and Asia. 11% of land worldwide is said to be the world's forests and are legally owned by the indigenous people (Sobrevila, 2008).

However, with the rapid encroachment into these areas by the activities of developed and developing countries, the environment is now deteriorating. As a result, more and more diseases have been identified, affecting human health and even leading to death. A World Health Organisation (WHO) (2016) study found that thirteen million deaths each year are associated with environmental factors that should be preventable. WHO (2007) states that indigenous people are more susceptible to health problems than the general population.

2. Problem Statement

The health of an individual can be affected by the cleanliness of his/her environment. A clean and properly maintained environment will improve the health of a community. Pollution and environmental neglect are not only harm the health of humans but also can be life-threatening. WHO (2016) has emphasised that the environment does impact an individual's health status, depending on how much an individual has been exposed to a source or agent of a dangerous disease. The indirect effect can be attributed to individual involvement in the disrupting the natural balance of the ecosystem, resulting in polluted environments which exposes the community to the outbreaks of diseases. The indigenous people, although considered a minority group in Malaysia, are not immune from issues related to health and the environment. Among the diseases common in the indigenous community in Malaysia are malaria, tuberculosis (TB), dengue, leptospirosis and diseases caused by malnutrition (Utusan Online, 2017). In addition, a total of 51.4% indigenous people in a previous study was diagnosed with a chronic illness (Che Noriah et al., 2012). However, studies looking at the effects of environment on health are rarely done due to financial factors (Remoundou & Koundouri, 2009).

3. Research Questions

The findings in this paper are confined to only one aspect of a wider study. The main question for this paper is to find out:

What is the level of knowledge of the Sungai Tekai indigenous community about the importance of preserving their environment in relation to their health status?

4. Purpose of the Study

Public health plays an important role in ensuring the balance of the two elements, namely health and the environment. Remoundou and Koundouri (2009) stated that environment and health are

complementary. Public health is a branch of medicine which stresses the concept of disease prevention in the community rather than the individual itself (Novick & Morrow, 2018). The National Center for Environmental Health (2014) has defined the role of public health with regard to the environment as monitoring, diagnosing, informing, mobilizing, developing, enforcing, linking, assuring, evaluating and researching.

Among the branches of public health emphasized in this study is to educate the community to accept changes. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the educational aspect of the preservation of the cleanliness of the environment among the community. However, the lack of knowledge among the indigenous people about the importance of preserving the environment in terms of health outcomes is apparent through their daily practices. It is clear that the Sungai Tekai indigenous community do not prioritise the cleanliness of their environment as evidenced by rubbish strewn everywhere in the community. For instance, disposable food packaging can be seen dumped indiscriminately along the roads. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to find out the perceptions of the indigenous people in Sungai Tekai of the need to preserve their environment in relation to health outcomes.

5. Research Methods

This study used a qualitative approach in the process of data collection and data analysis as this is the best approach to observe a phenomenon in depth. The study used primary data collected during field observations and via semi-structured interviews. This study was conducted among residents of Kampung Orang Asli Sungai Tekai, Jerantut, Pahang in their settlement. The respondents were observed for three months, starting from June until August 2018.

6. Findings

6.1. Health Aspect

As the aim of this study was focussed on the health aspect of the environmental preservation on the indigenous community, the first step was to obtain a health profile of the sample.

The results of the health screening that measured the Body Mass Index (BMI) among adults showed that slightly more than half of the indigenous people of Sungai Tekai had a normal body mass index (56.4%). However, 23.1% of the respondents were found to be overweight, while 2.6% of the respondents were obese. Meanwhile, 17.9% of the respondents were underweight (Table 1). Health records reported that the overall health of Sungai Tekai indigenous people as moderate. In terms of hygiene, several children were diagnosed with skin problems or scabies. The study also found that more than 50.0% of the villagers, especially women and girls, had lice infestation.

Table 01. Body mass index among Sungai Tekai adult indigenous people

	F	%
Underweight	7	17.9
Normal	22	56.4
Overweight	9	23.1
Obese	1	2.6
Total	39	100.0

The normal BMI might be the result of community acceptance of non-customary lifestyle changes. Indigenous people today are starting to become exposed to foreign culture and habits such as dietary influences, which has both positive and negative impacts. From a positive standpoint, it is seen as an encouraging development where they can receive food sources other than purely forest resources (Seow et al., 2013). However, it also has a negative impact in which the intake of non-nutritious foods such as snacks not only affects their health but also their environment with the poor disposal habits of the packaging waste resulting in the degradation of the environment. This was supported by Sahdan and Ahmad's (2009) study in which changes in indigenous people's lifestyle has mostly negative consequences. Furthermore, the unwillingness of the community to accept changes interrupts the development process leading to a variety of negative impacts (Ibrahim, 2009).

6.2. The Aspect of Preservation of the Environment

This study found that Sungai Tekai indigenous people still carry out activities related to their traditional lifestyle such as hunting and harvesting forests. However, they are unaware of the importance of maintaining the cleanliness of their surroundings. Observations showed that trash was dumped indiscriminately. Based on interviews conducted, some residents claimed that while many did not care about village cleanliness, only a minority in the village showed their concern. It appears that the level of awareness of the indigenous community of Sungai Tekak on the need to preserve the cleanliness of their environment is at a very low level, which supports the study's call to educate the community on this aspect.

The relationship between indigenous peoples and the environment is one of mutual co-existence. Most of the indigenous people's resources and their way of life is dependent on this co-existence. Siti Aminah (2015) stated that the indigenous people live in harmony with their natural environment. This statement is also supported by previous studies which showed that the environment has affected indigenous people, particularly in terms of lifestyle as well as their economic resources (Mee & Ibrahim, 2008) who claim that indigenous people in Peninsular Malaysia still practice traditional way of life which is heavily influenced by the environment. The influences of this environment are very strong. Skills that are in line with the indigenous people's daily activities such as hunting, fishing and gathering forest resources are a result of the interaction between indigenous people and the forest (Redzuan & Emby, 2008). Amir Zal (2013) stated that the indigenous people, in fact, have inherited a wealth of knowledge as a method of getting food resources and methods to survive derived from ancestors with the influence of environment although it has not been documented. Hence, the preservation of the environment is essential to ensure that not only is this legacy of treasures preserved, but also the early prevention of health problems is monitored. This ties in with the idea of preservation as maintaining something, so it does not disappear or change or deteriorate.

Sadly, the attitude and behaviour of indigenous people are changing for the worse. They are slowly but irrevocably losing their culture of protecting the environment. This contradicts with historical truth where they were known as the community which was inextricably tied to the environment. Nowadays however, with the overwhelming onslaught of modernisation, they appear to no longer behave or think as their ancestors did. Their behaviour ignores concerns regarding environmental cleanliness which could cause harm, especially to their health. However, the indigenous community cannot be fully blamed for their

apparent lack of concern for the cleanliness of the environment. It must be noted that this current lifestyle, such as eating packaged food is not one that they are familiar with. All their traditional food sources were not wrapped in paper or plastic; hence, they did not face any garbage disposal problems. Now, faced with this issue, they lack the knowledge needed to live healthily within their changing lifestyle.

According to Latif and Sakip (2005) in Siti Aminah (2015), indigenous people are still unaware of the importance of preserving their culture. They appear to be complacent, in Malaysia at least, with the “development” that they have been receiving. This is supported by Syed (2006) in which development has changed the lifestyle of the indigenous people so much so the present generation is becoming alienated from their cultural and ancestral practices (Siti Aminah, 2015). Abdullah (2008) posits that the diversity of the indigenous people based on tribal affiliations or where they live makes it difficult to accurately interpret the impacts of such development on the traditions and behaviour of indigenous communities.

Education is a vital part of public health concerns that emphasizes the need for proper knowledge acquired by an individual to achieve positive changes. However, education for indigenous people is still sorely lacking as revealed in this study. According to Seow et al. (2013), indigenous people’s education is given less coverage because they belong to a minority group. This situation is unacceptable as, just like all other communities in Malaysia, indigenous people have the right to educational access and to a healthy life. The attempt to “develop” the indigenous people must include educational access, primarily that of health education.

7. Conclusion

This study has illustrated the lack of awareness of the importance of preservation of the environment, specifically related to the health aspect, among indigenous people of the Sungai Tekai village in Malaysia. The knowledge of the community about the importance of a healthy environment is still very weak. They do not have a far-reaching view of the importance of preserving the environment and the impact on their health. Furthermore, this community has been found to be alienated from their traditional lifestyle and practices. The cultural preservation of the environment bequeathed by their ancestors seems to be misaligned to the development that they have been receiving. The health profile also shows that the majority of the community are afflicted with various health problems, many of which are caused by a dirty environment.

To alleviate this situation, the community needs to be made aware of the importance of environmental impact on health and preservation of the environment particularly from the aspect of health. Therefore, environmental education, through formal education and non-formal approaches should be conveyed to the indigenous community in Sungai Tekai from an early age to make changes easily achievable.

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