

Writing from their hearts

DEVELOPERS want the Selangor River dammed. But the conservationists are protesting. Besides being a popular site for picnics and whitewater rafting, the river is famous for its fireflies.

But it was the people, the Orang Asli of Pertak and Gerachi whose lives would be disrupted, who inspired two *New Straits Times* journalists to write an award-winning story.

On Monday, Pang Hin Yue and Sarah Sabaratnam received the ICI-CCM Environmental Journalism Award, 1998/99.

They write here of their experiences while working on the story.

PANG HIN YUE:

"For the first time in my eight years as a journalist, I cried. Never had I seen such poverty. Such helplessness. There was this frail woman, Seri, widowed with eight sickly children, with no food or money. How I wished I could take away some of her pain."

Her personal tragedy of being forced off her ancestral land inspired my colleague Sarah Sabaratnam and I to write, like we had never done before, about what can happen when development fails to take into account the people it affects.

Seri and the rest of the Orang Asli community displaced by the Batu Dam 15 years ago have yet to taste the fruits of development. Until we ran our first story, their children did not have access to education.

The story of Seri and her family became our starting point when we got wind of an impending dam in Selangor. Would the mistake of Batu Dam be repeated with the proposed Sungai Selangor Dam?

For three weeks, we worked day and night. We



AND THE WINNER IS ... The stories that won Pang and Sarah the award

made repeated trips to Kuala Kubu Baru. We went to the two Orang Asli villages there. We listened to what the local community had to say. We hounded the State Assemblyman. We cornered the Selangor Menteri Besar. We talked to experts on dams, river management and water resources. We networked with Malaysians who share similar concerns. Of course, we also talked to the dam developers.

It was not difficult to write the stories which came in three instalments because we wrote from our heart. And with our editor who shared our vision and passion, we pursued the issue with all our might.

We felt encouraged when the feedback came in. Shortly after highlighting Seri's plight, we were told that the Jabatan Hal Ehwal Orang Asli made arrangements to take Seri's children to school. We had calls from people



CONCERNED ... The plight of the Orang Asli moved Sarah (left) and Pang into relentlessly pursuing the story

who were touched by the story. Some offered to

donate money. Some wanted to know how they can help stop the dam.

We also ruffled a few feathers, but we know a story works when it moves people.

Although we do not know whether the dam will be built, at least we can say we tried to deliver the stories as honestly as we could."

SARAH SABARATNAM:

"They were my first environmental stories ever. I wasn't assigned to them. I just happened to accompany Hin Yue on her assignment to the Orang Asli villages in KKB. I thought there might be a story there for *YouthQuake* (to which I'm attached). But after going there and talking to some of the Orang Asli, I saw how dis-

turbed the adults were about the impending dam. Up till then, I was not interested in environmental issues. I preferred to do stories on people or cover social issues. But by being there among very real people, I saw that the environment does have a human angle, and is in fact related to society.

So when Hin Yue later asked me if I would help

her with the Selangor Dam stories, I was interested, but very afraid and lacked confidence. I was quite a young journalist then (still am!) and other than recycling, knew nothing about environmental issues.

During my first few excursions with Hin Yue, I was in a daze because I'd never had such exposure.

But Hin Yue was very encouraging and supportive. She showed me the ropes and introduced me to the right people and after a while, I got the hang of it. Her enthusiasm and dedication for her work was also contagious.

To do the stories, we had to go to KKB quite often. I remember the long journeys now. We were there almost every weekend and some week days.

During one of the Sungai Selangor Open days I was supposed to write a story on the mood and atmosphere there. So to get a feel of things, I did things like go whitewater kayaking in the rain, in my jeans (because I didn't bring my shorts). I got thoroughly drenched.

There were late nights. I missed church and sometimes worked over the weekend to get the stories ready on time. But our hearts were in it so it did not matter. We believed in what we were doing.

It was also quite a strain on me, because in the midst of running off to KKB, I had stories to do for *YouthQuake*. My YQ boss was disapproving at first because he was afraid I would neglect my YQ work. That gave me additional stress because I had to prove to him that I could keep up both beats. After a while though, he saw the contentment I found in working on those stories and was very supportive. (Thanks, Hisham!)

The greatest reward is when the hard work pays off.

If we had uncovered the truth without bias, created awareness, helped save the communities of Gerachi and Pertak and succeeded in causing someone, somewhere to change for the better, then we have done our job, and done it well.

Happiness is in the head

THE secret to happiness, it turns out, may not be wealth or power. Or love or success or faithful friendship. Or Ray Charles crooning *Georgia On My Mind* or

cult," he added. "They tell us if we really want to learn about meditation they could give us instruction, and if we like it we can