




WINDOWS INTO HISTORY THREE:

# ROAD HUNGER — JEEP TRACKS MAKING WAY FOR DEVELOPMENT IN SABAH

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Windows into History Three:

# Road Hunger

Jeep Tracks Making Way for Development in Sabah

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The journey through “Windows into History” continues. After highlighting the shambles of the Trans-Borneo mega projects (1894 -1905) in earlier articles, we now see how the much cheaper and user-friendly jeep tracks did a better job.

As a Crown Colony after the Second World War, Sabah received the full colonial treatment, albeit in the second class carriage. The British had long-learned how to transform subsistence economies in Asia and Africa into global primary producers. They started with small investments into many primitive roads to connect to export markets. Instead of wasting capital on mega-projects, larger investments followed only where the rural economy had grown enough to justify better roads that the local economies themselves could help finance.

This was the model unleashed in North Borneo in the 1950s, through “jeep tracks’. These mud roads rapidly cut through the forest by local labour under the direction of the District Officers relying not upon surveyors but locals who selected and followed the longstanding human, elephant and wildlife tracks.

Jeep tracks lacked drains and bridges and often needed a four-wheel drive even when it wasn’t raining. But they cost less than £15,000 a mile and were underwritten by Commonwealth Development and Welfare Grants from 1954. The British calculated that an average of 250 acres of farmland would be opened per mile of jeep track (about half the area within half a mile of the track); and that since one acre of agriculture was worth around £300 per year to the economy, the return on investment for such roads was as much as 5-fold in a single year.

The British found that “successful road development is correlated with high population growth”. Meanwhile Sabahans learned that roads meant opportunity and they should move to the road, rather than waiting for the road to come to them.

“Unless further roads are constructed, it is obvious that development and hence expansion of settlement will be confined to two areas where lines of communication are relatively better developed: the West Coast and the Central High Plains. Settlement in other parts of North Borneo may remain substantially the same for many more years ... but easy and quick communications are essential prerequisites to economic development.”

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By 1959 Britain finally had the resources to invest in expanding these roads and sent J.R. Sargent to North Borneo to prepare a Report on Transport Requirements in the Light of Economic Development in North Borneo. Sargent was an unusual transport economist in that he found his numbers in the mud rather than the office. He built his planning model from the ground up, using field visits to gather local views and check the real situation.

Sargent opened his report with the disarmingly amusing remark: “those who drop from the skies dressed as experts have no business to expect a warm welcome from those who are steeped in the problems and who will have to live with the solutions that they propose”. He also revealed the disagreement between the Public Works Department (PWD) and the District Officers as to what constituted proper road building and on the division of budget.

The PWD surveyed and built excellent roads for £30,000-40,000 per mile that could run lorries and land rovers, required less maintenance and were more passable in the rains than the infamous jeep tracks. The jeep tracks laid out by the District Officers would frequently later need upgrading by the PWD, requiring more work and higher costs. PWD wanted jeep track construction replaced by proper roads that cost only twice as much per mile. On the other hand, Sargent showed that District Officers simply had better knowledge of where roads were actually needed rather than where they could be best surveyed and knew about the availability of local labour.

Furthermore, jeep tracks could be built in a few months while the PWD took two years to survey and plan before even breaking ground. Since a successful jeep track paid for itself many times over in a single year, it was worth building the track right away even if it would eventually need rebuilding. He showed that while land rovers were less efficient than lorries when running full loads, operators preferred them on all but major routes because they were more flexible in carrying both people and small variable quantities of goods. While buses and lorries were more viable on these bigger roads bringing further economies of scale and growth.

Coalition 3H asks: what can we understand about “jeep tracks” and their role in economic development? What can we learn about local knowledge informing local decisions for local needs, and the concept of incremental growth based on need?

In the next segment of this journey, we will learn why ribbon development is the key reason Sabah’s main roads are congested and how it still influences the development of road infrastructure today.

Ends.

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