

Contribution to World Swallowtail & Birdwing Butterfly Conservation Day 9 June 2019 from Sabah (Malaysian Borneo)

The Courtship Dance of the Kinabalu Birdwing Butterfly *Troides andromache* (IUCN Red Data Listed 'Near Threatened')

This dance is unknown in the rare Kinabalu Birdwing but I have observed it in the closely related Rajah Brooke's Birdwing. I once stood, almost touching, beneath a pair of Rajahs while the male circled intently, very, very close and slightly in front of a female, round and round in a tight circle - for 20 minutes! Many male butterflies have scent scales on their wings from which perfumes (pheromones) can be wafted down on a female to persuade her to accept a mating. I presume this was what was happening.

Thinking of the problem of how to engage the imagination of young people in the conservation of butterflies I thought back to the dance I had seen. It has been said that the best way to engage the young in conservation is through art forms – music, painting, drawing – and dance. Why not, I thought, create a Birdwing courtship dance for the village dance group at Kiau, high on Mt Kinabalu (summit 4,095m) to promote conservation awareness among the villagers (the Kinabalu Birdwing is endangered).

Lily Banati, the manager of the dance troupe, took up the idea, closely followed my instructions and with a couple of trained choreographers from the village has created the dance.

To make it more entertaining, we have three couples circling and interchanging as in a stately *gavotte*. This started as a folk dance which became popular at the court of King Louis XIV of France in the 16th Century. It is solemn and formal. It seems to me this reflects well the seriousness of the butterfly courtship in nature. It is an essential rite of passage for many butterflies, without which no fertile eggs are laid. The female will not mate unless the male puts on a good dance performance! The wafting down of perfumes is a key part of the persuasion process. In the village version, perfume wafting is shown by delicate hand movements. Close, but never touching.

What I like about this dance is the way it takes the traditional Dusun folk dance form and extends it into something new and creative, while quite closely reflecting what happens in nature. It is a graceful and entertaining insight into the natural capital (heritage) the young people of the village are inheriting, enacted by themselves.

The video was made after only 5 sessions of rehearsal time. So the girls aren't totally clear about the steps! We now have funding for a professional shoot after more rehearsal and coaching. We hope to do an indoor version, and then an outdoor version with Mt K resplendent as the backdrop.

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