

Headline **Birds and bugs of the forest have a lot to tell**
 Date **21. Mar 2009** Language **ENGLISH**
 Media Title **New Straits Times** Page No **23**
 Section **Local News** Article Size **498** cm2
 Circulation **158042** Frequency **Daily**
 Readership **512000** Color **Full Color**
 AdValue **7093.15**

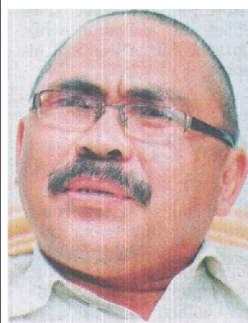


WORLD FORESTRY DAY



Birds and bugs of the forest have a lot to tell

Over the last decade, forest care in Malaysia has improved under sustainable forest management practices. Now, experts tell CHAI MEI LING that a shift to conservation is the key to retaining these national treasures



Project director Shamsudin Ibrahim wants to sell the idea of conservation to politicians

Conservation of Biodiversity Project is a study on the ecology and economic value of forests. Part of the project aims to calculate the impact of activities like logging, using samples from animals like birds and insects (below).



FOR months now, a team of scientists has been busy trapping moths, netting birds and collecting dung beetles in the heart of the Temenggor forest in Grik, Perak.

These little creatures have a huge tale to tell.

As bio-indicators, they are going to help the experts to determine the "health" of the forest before and after logging.

This biodiversity assessment, one of the main activities under the Conservation of Biodiversity Project, is important because one would then know the degree of impact logging has on insects, birds, and to a larger extent, mammals and plants.

That was just the ecological part of the study.

The ambitious project also wants to put a ringgit-and-sen tag to the jungle's resources.

So, for the first time, experts can tell the price of clean water coming out from a patch of forest, how much eco-tourism revenue an area will generate, and what the value of beetles feeding on elephant dung is to the ecosystem.

By combining these ecological and economic values, scientists hope to devise decision-making tools.

The end result would hopefully resemble a predictive system, where just by feeding samples of bats, birds and bugs, a computer model would be able to tell exactly how much impact activities like logging would have on an area's ecosystem.

Comprehensive details like the amount of money needed to clean up sedimentation left by the logging process would also be available.

With this tool in the near future, state authorities and forestry officials will be able to make more informed decisions in harvesting forest resources, such as whether an area is worth logging or not.

The first of its kind in the world, this project will take five years to complete, costs US\$5.6 million (RM20.45 million) and needs the expertise of top local and international scientists.

So why trouble ourselves and spend so much money?

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It's all because we want to find out how biodiversity can be conserved in our forests.

Having protected areas isn't good enough these days, said national project director Dr Shamsudin Ibrahim.

There must be conservation even in managed areas.

"Sustainable forest management (SFM) covers biodiversity preservation, but it's very general.

"This research tries to translate that policy into action and guidelines that are easily implemented by the

Forestry Department.

"And when we talk about SFM, it's not only about timber.

"We have to look at whether the integrity of the ecosystem remains intact when you're logging.

Shamsudin, a divisional director at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), also contends that other functions of the forests have not been adequately highlighted.

"We have to talk in the dollar-and-cent language because we want to sell the idea of conservation to politicians."

Coming to its third year soon, the study will come up with improved logging methods.

But some may argue that this study will arm decision-makers with a licence to justify more logging.

Senior programme manager Dr Hari Ramalu Ragavan of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said logging activities are not going to cease.

"So our role is to make sure it is done properly and we can sustain it in the long run."

The Conservation of Biodiversity Project is funded by the International Tropical Timber Organisation and Global Environment Facility through UNDP.

It is undertaken by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and FRIM.