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It may be last 'timber!' for some

Chai Mei Ling

KUALA LUMPUR: More than half of subspecies from a commercially vital family of timber trees in Peninsular Malaysia are under threat, with some so rare they are almost extinct.

The dipterocarpaceae family, whose members include commercial heavyweights balau, chengal, mer-sawa and meranti, have, for decades, been major contributors to the country's economy.

Almost 70 per cent of this group of lowland rainforest trees add to national revenue by way of valuable plywood, resin and aromatic oil trade.

Scientists have found that 55.5 per cent or 91 of the family's 164 subspecies and varieties are under threat.

Land use change since the 1960s have resulted in species like the keruing padi and balau putih becoming extremely rare, existing only in sporadic, small pockets of forests in the peninsula, said Dr Lilian Chua of the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM).

Some species are endemic not just to the country, but only in specific districts.

The merawan kanching, for example, is found only in the Kanching forest reserve, Selangor.

"If it ceases to exist there, you won't find it in the world any more," said Chua, who is FRIM conservation and biodiversity informatic branch head.

Chua, who was speaking at the Flora of Malaysia seminar in Kepong, Selangor, recently, has, for the last five years, led a team of botanists in assessing endangered Malaysian plants.

The first compilation of their work, a Plant Red List for the dipterocarpaceae family, will be published in three months.

The list will detail threatened species, their exact location and conservation methods.

The team will go on to compile a list for every other family of vascular plants in the peninsula, where some 7,000 species are expected to be examined.

Chua said the existence of a list of threatened plants will determine the priority for conservation efforts in the country.

"We always say we don't know our resources enough to conserve, but now that we know where all these rare plants are on the ground, are we going to do anything?"

One conservation method is for protected forests to be enlarged to include habitats of these rare species.

"In-situ protection is important.

"There's no faster and more efficient way for species to be regenerated than maintaining mother trees in natural forests.

"This will also make it a good genetic resource area."

Although rare species are non-tradable, all it takes is a mix-up in identification during harvesting to fell the trees and wipe the species off the planet, which is why it is so important to seal off the area from production, said Chua.

"Dipterocarpaceae is a very charismatic family.

"No amount of money can make up for the loss of one or two species.

"Once gone, they will never come back."



Dr Lilian Chua says once a species is gone, it will never come back



Yellow meranti (*Shorea peltata*) is one of the rare species in the dipterocarpaceae family, a group important to the timber trade.