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Getting up-close with tropical trees, timber

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IT was most appropriate for the foreign and local media representatives on the Malaysian Timber Council Familiarisation Programme to get up-close with the tropical trees and timber recently.

After all, they had heard so much about tropical timber at the "Dialogue on Requirement for Timber Legality Verification in the Global Market", held at Nikko Hotel, Kuala Lumpur on Oct 18.

First, we were taken to the regenerated forest area at Sungai Tekala, then the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), about 45 minutes' drive from Kuala Lumpur, and lastly, Vin-for-est Industries in Port Klang. On hand to brief us at the Sungai Tekala Recreational Forest was Muhamad bin Murad, assistant director of the Law and Prosecution Division, Forestry Department Headquarters in Selangor.

Apart from being a recreational forest, the 242-ha lowland dipterocarp forest is also a forest management demonstration area. Several plots of land there have been designated for observation of various stages of forest regeneration after harvesting.

The forest, initially managed under the Malayan Uniform System, now comes under the Selective Management System (SMS).

Muhamad shared with us many interesting facts on the procedures of proper harvesting. For instance, a forester has to estimate the number of logs that a particular tree can produce before harvesting.

The move is to enable the exact number of tags to be issued.

"If a tree can produce three logs and suddenly, there are five logs, the timber cannot be moved. We'd have to go in and check the stump. If we are satisfied, we will issue the extra tags. Otherwise, we may charge the loggers for felling extra trees," explained Muhamad.

The loggers are also given a special "Tree Marking and Timber Production Control book" to fill. The checking station must keep the book for inspection.

After a tree has been harvested, the stump should bear the Forestry Department's hammer mark and tag. All skid trails and temporary log yards are planted with seedlings of dipterocarp species by the concessionaire or contractor immediately after harvesting.

To enable us to have a close look at the trees in a virgin tropical rainforest, Muhamad brought us up a track to an area about 150 metres above sea level. Along the track, we saw many tropical tree species such as "Meranti Tembaga", "Balau", "Meranti Sarang Punai" and "Keruing Mempelas".

We learnt that 20 hectares of the forest there had never been logged before.

We were also told that Selangor had stopped harvesting timber from the forest since 2005.

"Most of our politicians now are environment-conscious," said Muhamad.

Next, we visited the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM). This time, many of the MTC Global Timber Woodmart 2010 delegates joined us.

The buyers and suppliers at the woodmart came not only from Malaysia but also Brazil, Chile, China, France, Germany, Ghana, Indonesia, New Zealand,

Singapore, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), United Kingdom, Uruguay and the United States of America.

On hand to brief us at FRIM was Dr Rahim Sudin, head of Biocomposite & Wood Protection.

A 600-hectare man-made forest and the green lung of Kuala Lumpur, FRIM is a recreational park as well as a forest reserve.

Eighty years ago, the institute grounds were abandoned tin mine pits, vegetable gardens and shrub-by forest.

Since 1926, foresters and scientists have nurtured the forest back

to life. Today, FRIM is also well known as a centre of excellent forestry research.

Because of the time constraints, I opted to visit only the Research Gallery and Museum where I met some SK Selayang pupils and their teachers.

Many of the foreigners in our group were more adventurous - they went for the Nature Walk and Canopy Walk.

The Canopy Walk, a 200-metre long sisal bridge suspended 30 metres above the ground, was built in 1992 for scientific studies of above ground flora and fauna.

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A "Meranti Tembaga" tree.



A "Balau" tree.



VIN-FOREST'S workers painting hand rails.



FOREIGN media representatives taking snapshots of a tropical tree in Sungai Tekala. PHOTOS: ADELINE L'ONG

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MUHAMAD bin Murad briefing the foreign and local media representatives in Sungai Tekala.

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CHAN Kok Chin, Vin-forest Sdn Bhd's export manager poses with moulded doors.

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A hundred thousand visitors a year visit FRIM for eco-tourism.

"Sixty thousand of them are from overseas. That's how much they appreciate the tropical forests," said Dr Rahim.

Although Malaysia is one of the countries with the richest plant diversity in the world, its flora is still not fully documented. Peninsular Malaysia is said to have about 8,500 species while Sarawak and Sabah have 12,000 species.

FRIM and the Forestry Departments of Sarawak and Sabah initiated the Tree Flora of Sabah and Sarawak Project in 1991 to provide detailed and up-to-date botanical and ecological information on the tree resources of the two states.

The generous support of botanists from local and overseas institutions has resulted in the publication of six volumes of the Tree flora of Sabah and Sarawak, two Botanical Gazetteers and 99 scientific papers.

FRIM's Medicinal Plants Division also carries out research on herbal products commonly used by local communities. Dr Rahim revealed that there were at least 1,200 species of such herbs with potential pharmaceutical value.

The proposed high quality herbal-based products that could be manufactured include soaps, essential oils, creams, shampoos, tablet/liquid disinfectants, rinsing detergents, juices, herbal teas and perfumes.

FRIM's research has already resulted in the production and sale of *serai wang* based body, hair shampoo and mosquito repellent cream as well as mangosteen-based day and night cream, mangosteen juice and ice cream in the Malaysian market.

"We are working closely with the Ministry of Entrepreneur and Cooperative on these products. Watch out for the trade mark "FRIM Technologies" which means the products have been produced together with FRIM," said Dr Rahim.

The institute is also carrying out research on the possibilities of artificial induction and simulation of agarwood (locally known as gaharu) formation to supplement the production of the resinous, fragrant heartwood substance. Currently, the prices of agarwood are comparative to gold.

In Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, agarwood collec-

tion is becoming more difficult as the number of wild mature trees have fallen.

Over the years, FRIM has won many awards for its R&D excellence. For instance, on June 12 this year, its research team, which developed the engineered flooring from oil palm trunk, won the first place at the Selangor Science Technology and Innovation Festival 1010 (FesSTIS) for the Selangor Excellent Innovation Award 2010 under the category of innovation for industrial use.

Occasionally, FRIM's expertise in DNA fingerprinting of important timber species is sought by the Forestry Departments of various states to help link stolen logs to the forests from where they were taken.

"Every living tree has a unique DNA. With DNA fingerprinting, we have managed to help the Forestry Department prosecute a number of illegal loggers in some states including Sarawak," revealed Dr Rahim.

After FRIM, our next destination was Vin-Forest Industries Sdn Bhd, a manufacturer and exporter of solid timber door, HDF moulded door, timber frame, timber moulding and sawn timber.

On hand to show us around was Chan Kok Chin, the company's export manager. Vin-Forest has

obtained Certification for Chain-of-Custody (CoC) under the Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme (MTCS) and Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification Scheme (PEFC) for the manufacture and export of sawn timber and solid wood mouldings since August 2009.

The company, which commenced production around mid 2008, produces 5,000 pieces of solid timber doors, 20,000 pieces of skin doors and 600 cubic metres of general mouldings a month.

Chan said the company used a wide range of timber species such as "Meranti", "Merbau", "Merpauh", "Nyatoh", "Simpoh", "Bintangor", "Durian", "Balau" and Mixed Hardwood from Malaysia. The company also optimises its use of the timber. The sawdust is even sold - to be compressed into charcoal.

Vin-Forest exports its products to the UK and European market.

"Our buyers consist of well known joinery companies," said Chan.

The company, which has a complete production line-up for finger-joint and lamination processes, imports the machines it uses mainly from Europe. It employs mostly foreign workers in its factory.

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SK Selayang pupils inside the FRIM Research Gallery and Museum.

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SCHOOLBOYS take a close look at an exhibit of a "musang pulut" (civet or todody cat) in the FRIM Research Gallery and Museum.