

Environmental Education confab opens in Kuching

KUCHING: The Best of Both Worlds (BoBW) Conference on environmental education (EE) opened yesterday at the Kuching Hilton and will end on November 10. This is the second time Malaysia is playing host to the BoBW conference with Kuching as the venue this time.

The BoBW series of conference was first organised in South Africa in 1998 and was first held outside that country in Malaysia in 2005.

Due to common interest in the development of environmental education, Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) and University of South Africa (UNISA), which initiated the BoBW Conference, started working together on EE-related projects in 2003.

The first of these projects were training courses for staff of FRIM and non-governmental organisations at FRIM Nature Education Centre, facilitated by expert partners from UNISA's Teacher Education Department who specialised in training teachers in EE. In South Africa, EE has been in the formal school education curriculum for about 30 years, compared to Malaysia's less than 10 years. Thus, clearly shows Malaysia has benefited greatly from UNISA's experience in the formal education sector.

UNISA and FRIM later agreed to alternate the BoBW Conference in an effort to reach out to the two different parts of the world, and for the two countries to intensify the sharing and learning from each other. Last year, the Conference was held in Pretoria, South Africa and this year, it is back to Malaysia again.

The FRIM-UNISA collaboration will be strengthened further when an offer of a one-year EE certification programme be made to interested school teachers and EE facilitators in Malaysia next year. UNISA, one of the largest distance learning universities in the world, will award certificates to participants upon completion of the course, of which the practical components will be conducted by FRIM and another collaborative partner, Edutree Services.

This certification programme was disclosed yesterday by Natural Resources and Environment Minister Dato Sri Douglas Uggah Embas in his speech, read by Forestry Research and Development Board (MFRDB) chairperson Hajah Nancy Shukri, at the official opening of BoBW Conference

yesterday.

The Conference, themed "effective Environmental Education for Biodiversity Conservation," is jointly organised by FRIM and Sarawak Forestry Corporation with the support of the Education Ministry, Dewan Bandaraya Kuching Utara and Sarawak Convention Bureau.

The EE certification programme aims to fill the gap in Malaysia's training needs especially for pre-service and in-service teachers and environmental practitioners by providing them with a strong foundation in EE. It will also accord recognition to professional development in the field and acknowledge educators committed to promoting environmental stewardship.

In his welcoming address at the opening, FRIM Director General Dato' Dr Abdul Latif Mohmod said the best way to promote awareness for biodiversity conservation and environmentally responsible behaviour is through EE.

He also said the collective support from all stakeholders is also needed to achieve environment conservation targets, adding that FRIM works closely with stakeholders at all levels on EE and conservation efforts.

As an example, he cited the project on planting forest trees in schools, involving the Education Ministry, FRIM, Forestry Department Peninsular Malaysia, Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB), Malaysia Timber Council (MTC) and Malaysia Nature Society.

The project involving 17 schools all over Malaysia is funded by the Levy Fund from the Ministry of Plantation Industry and Commodities Malaysia (KPKK). It will be conducted with elements of education through theoretical and practical approaches to ensure understanding of the function and benefits of greening activities to serve as a good conservation programme, he said.

The Conference brought together EE experts, academicians and practitioners to highlight the importance of EE, to discuss the progress in EE and to share examples and lessons learnt from various parts of the world.

It registered 100 participants, mainly teachers, park and recreation area managers, academicians, NGOs, as well as interested individuals, including those from Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore.