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|-------------|--|--------------|---------------------|
| Headline | Premier research institutes deserve more funding | Language | English |
| Date | 29 Nov 2010 | Page No | 78 |
| MediaTitle | The Edge | Article Size | 460 cm ² |
| Section | Corporate | Color | Full Color |
| Journalist | N/A | ADValue | 8,226 |
| Frequency | Weekly | PRValue | 24,677 |
| Circ / Read | 25,041 / | | |



Premier research institutes deserve more funding

For many years, Kepong was the place where I lived when I was growing up. A new village town bordering Jinjang, it was an area with a high crime rate and an address that many people avoided if they wanted to buy a house. But in the midst of this unfancied residential area is a sanctuary for nature lovers — the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM).

A tropical forest park that provides much needed natural green space for city dwellers, FRIM serves to remind us why we should continue to preserve our tropical forests, which are among the oldest in the world. Not many cities around the globe have a tropical paradise on their doorstep.

At FRIM, city folk can take part in a lot of activities close to nature. It is a place for joggers, jungle trekkers, picnickers and photography buffs — one can go bird watching or camping, take a 200m canopy walk, go biking or swim beside the waterfalls. There is also a botanical garden, museum, insectarium and arboretum — an area where visitors can view and find out more about the many types of trees that grow in a tropical forest.

Founded in 1929, FRIM (which began as the Forest Research Institute during British colonial days) has for many years been one of world's top tropical forest research institutes.

As I have a brother who studied forestry and taught at FRIM and school friends who lived nearby, it was not surprising that I took a liking to the forestry and timber sector when I became a journalist.

I have not covered the industry for quite some time now, but I was glad to note that FRIM had celebrated the official declaration of its main campus as a natural heritage site on Nov 18.

This follows the government's move to gazette the whole of FRIM as a natural heritage site on Feb 10 last year. With the official declaration, the 485.2ha site is to be conserved and protected for future generations under the Natural Heritage Act 2005.

Having won numerous international awards and acknowledgements as a premier research centre, FRIM aims to move a step higher — getting listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site within the next few years. To achieve

this, it will come up with a comprehensive conservation management plan, which should not be too difficult for an institute of its stature.

Its director-general Datuk Abd Latif Mohmod said FRIM is unique in the sense that it is the "largest man-made forest in the world and it can serve as a model of reforestation, forest management and forest protection for the world".

With its pioneering research in many fields within the forestry sector and timber industry, FRIM hopes to inspire a Malaysian to win the Marcus Wallenberg Prize, considered the forestry industry's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. Again, not an impossible task for a research institute of its stature.

So, to further keep updated on the latest developments, I went to the FRIM homepage to see how this world-renowned institute is funded. I was surprised to find out from its latest annual report, for 2009, that it received and spent only RM26.5 million on research and development. The report also stated that FRIM had exceeded its key performance indicator expectation for the year and

maintained the MS ISO 9001:2008 quality certification for the third year running. In 2009, it also received the prestigious Nikkei Asia Prize for Science, Technology and Innovation in recognition of its contribution to environmental protection in the region.

A sum of RM26.5 million could be considered paltry for an institute with 200 researchers, about 70 of whom are PhD holders. Of the total, RM8.2 million was secured via grants from the Science Fund, the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation.

For comparison, Britain will launch its UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation, which is expected to start operations in 2015, with an investment of £600 million (RM2.97 bil-

lion), plus £100 million (RM496.3 million) for its operating budget. Among the big global companies, Microsoft spent US\$9 billion (RM28 billion) on R&D in 2009 while Toyota spent US\$7.8 billion, Samsung US\$6 billion and IBM US\$5.8 billion.

We can't afford such huge sums but for a country that aspires to be a high income and developed nation by 2020, we are spending too little on R&D. On average, Malaysia only spent 0.6% of its GDP on R&D compared with Taiwan's 2.4% and South Korea's 3.5%. We can afford to spend more if we are more efficient

in allocating the available resources.

If we are willing to spend RM40 billion to build a mass rapid transit system to solve the traffic problem in greater Kuala Lumpur (I think a lot less investment would be needed to expand the current rail systems and link those with a good bus network), surely the government and the private sector can allocate or donate more funds to our premier institutions like FRIM. Others include the Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia, Palm Oil Research Institute of Malaysia, the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute and Institute of Medical Research.

The government's economic transformation programme (ETP) does not specifically look into transforming the R&D sector but it has set up a Unit Inovasi Khas (Unik) to develop, implement strategies and support innovation programmes while aiming for higher success in commercialising the country's R&D and innovations.

This is a welcome move as Unik will also develop a more centralised funding mechanism while the present fragmented funding schemes will be consolidated. It is hoped that the premier research institutes will benefit from Unik's existence.

The country has established its research strength in forestry and agriculture and these sectors can continue to remain productive and efficient parts of a diversified economy. We are well ahead of our com-

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petitors in forestry, rubber and palm oil R&D, but more effort is needed to turn more of the research into improving industrial and manufacturing processes and producing marketable end-products.

It was through the power of R&D that FRIM managed to help make waste products like rubberwood, previously used as firewood, and oil palm trunks, which were just left to rot, into commercial timber species for the furniture industry. It was R&D too that removed obstacles such as the difficulty in treating and drying the timber and susceptibility to fun-

gal and insect attacks.

Today, 80% of Malaysia's wooden furniture exports are manufactured from rubberwood, while oil palm trunks can now be turned into composite panel products such as medium density fibreboard, laminated veneer lumber, mineral-bonded particle board, plywood and furniture. It has been estimated that one million of the two million oil palm trunks available each year can be used for furniture production. The government plans to substitute 20% of the usage of rubberwood with oil palm wood.

The use of rubberwood and oil

palm wood, which are sustainably available throughout the year from the replanting of rubber and oil palm, means that there will be less pressure on us to cut down more tropical forests.

More funding needs to be made available to these research institutions as they will continue to help the nation stay ahead of its competitors in the timber, rubber and palm oil industries. They deserve it. ■

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