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# On Malaysian forests

A dramatic retelling of the story of Forest Research Institute Malaysia. BY Ilsa Sharp

**H**ow many KL residents realise that one of the world's most historic botanical research institutes nestles in the tropical rainforest of the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in Kepong, just 16km northwest of the city centre? Or what a powerhouse role that institute has played in the Malaysian economy and the nation's international scientific reputation?

For that matter, how many Singaporeans realise that this centre — Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) — supplied much of the initial brain power that shaped their Garden City in the form of foresters such as FRIM's former deputy chief research officer Wong Yew Kwan?

(Wong served as Singapore's commissioner of parks and recreation from 1974 to 1982 under former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew's greening programme.)

FRIM is actually only 25 years old, created by an Act of Parliament in October 1985 that metamorphosed it from the Forest Research Institute (FRI) into a new statutory board. But the FRI had antecedents in the Forest Department's former research branch, established in 1918, and the Forest Department itself all the way back in 1901, hence this book's centenarian title.

Looking at the verdant forested hills surrounding the 486ha FRIM site today, it seems incredible that when the first forest research officer Dr FW Foxworthy (surprisingly, an American) took over the Kepong site for FRIM's predecessor in 1925, it was a degraded former open-cast tin-mining site occupied by market-gardening squatters. But Foxworthy and his then boss, the head of the colonial Malayan Forest Service, G E S Cubitt, together with forest economist J G Watson, busied themselves with new plantings, using 100 different types of seeds and transplanting 25,000 seedlings by the end of 1926. We see the leafy results of their passion today — most tropical rainforest tree species need a cycle of 70 years to mature. Small wonder then that the entire FRIM site was declared a Heritage Site by Malaysia's National Heritage Department in 2005.

Despite the weighty nature of the serious science done at FRIM, this well-researched book (issued this year despite its 2010 imprint) manages to bring alive a host of fascinating personalities and to tell an often dramatic story. The author, Dr

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Francis Ng, is the perfect FRIM storyteller, a distinguished forester and consultant botanist and a FRIM employee from 1964 to 1990.

The book's crammed and somewhat hectic layout, with some marginal "side-bar" panels running awkwardly across as many as three or four pages, speaks of a text bursting at the seams with yet more stories waiting to be told; it might perhaps have benefited from the luxury of a few more pages. The choice of bold typeface for the picture captions also "shouts" a bit too loudly. And finally, the aesthetics of modern, not just historical, black-and-white landscape photos juxtaposed with colour contributions harvested from a public photo competition are also dubious; in particular, the strange "dead tree" look of the black-and-white cover image, while kind of arty, is ... er ... unorthodox, shall we say? But many other excellent illustrations and the storytelling in the book override such quibbles.

There are countless "Did You Know That?" moments. For example, we might be forgiven for thinking that Malaysian timber has always been the major and valuable export commodity that it became in the post-World War II era. It is all too easy to forget that right up to the 1950s, very few of the local woods were thought useful at all. In 1919, more than 2.5 million tonnes of wood culled from the then Federated Malay States were used as firewood. Only 212,000 tonnes were used as timber, mainly in railways and mines. In earlier days, Chengal (*Neobalanocarpus heimii*) was virtually the only wood anybody cared for and timber exports were negligible. It is very much thanks to the work of generations of FRIM foresters and researchers that markets have been expanded and for a much wider variety of woods.

No story writes the FRIM role in the Malaysian economy larger than the rubberwood story. As the volume of logs declined in the 1990s, it was clear that the industry needed a new catalyst. Until then, rubber trees had been cut and replanted every 25 years, generating 10 million cu m of waste wood every year. Rubberwood was seen as misshapen and susceptible to fungus attacks and woodborer beetles, thus it was fit only as firewood. In the face of sceptical mockery and countless technical obstacles, a team of 38 scientists led by the then FRI director Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor persevered in their belief that rubberwood could be treated to become

a viable furniture wood.

Indeed, as this book reveals, FRIM as we know it today was born of these scientists' stubbornness. In fact, its conversion by the Forest Department into a statutory board in 1985 was the direct result of a running dispute between the FRI's director and the director-general of the Forest Department on the merits of the rubberwood programme.

The FRIM team was proved right and today the rubberwood industry is worth more than RM6 billion a year to Malaysia. FRIM was justly honoured with the Mahathir Science Award 2009 for its sterling work on rubberwood furniture.

Other stories in the book resonate equally. Colonial forestry officers once had to keep detailed diaries in duplicate for filing twice a month with their bosses and for circulation to the rest of the staff. This practice was discontinued in 1965 when the last British officers left. But author Ng is understandably nostalgic about the idea, remarking that this discipline had "forced officers to review what they had done ..." and made them "keenly aware of the passage of time and of their personal roles in the making of history".

And who could fail to admire the dedication and determination of FRIM officers like H E Desch, who, although he was a prisoner of war held by the Japanese at Singapore's Changi jail during World War II, persistently lobbied his captors for the retrieval and publication of two key forestry texts in FRIM's seminal Malayan Forest Records publication series? Who would not applaud the intelligence and generosity of the Japanese conqueror's representatives Professor Hidezo Tanakadate and Marquis Yoshichika Tokugawa when they not only ensured publication, but in at least one case, paid for it out of their own pockets? FRIM has enjoyed a close association with Japanese scientists ever since as well as with German supporters and collaborators.

Forestry is a somewhat schizophrenic profession — foresters are passionately in love with trees yet often their craft is driven by the need to quarantine forests in reserves intended for economic purposes and eventual harvesting. Tree lovers will be discomfited by the detailed description in this book of early foresters' deliberate manipulation of forest composition by the favouring of "desirable" tree species and the brutal removal of "inferior" species,

sometimes by means of "poison-girdling". But the book also recounts FRIM's steady journey towards its current undoubted involvement in biodiversity conservation as Peninsular Malaysia's forested areas fell from 72% of land area to only 48 in just 20 years between 1958 and 1978 (today, this is stable at about 44% to 48%).

FRIM's seminal role in botanical research and science education is almost unrivalled, with its important arboreta collections and its herbarium — the largest plant reference museum in Malaysia (200,000 plant specimens) — recognised as Malaysia's National Herbarium.

It seems a pity that FRIM's leadership of the plan to create a new Natural History Museum Malaysia under FRIM's "parent" the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment has come to nought since its crystallisation in 2008. Muzium Negara set up its own Natural History Museum in Putrajaya in early 2009, under the Department of Museums Malaysia within its parent the Ministry of Information, Communications and Culture. However, FRIM's current plan to create a national biodiversity centre of its own will now be watched with some interest. Singaporeans will note that the island republic's decision to create its own similar Natural History Museum is also a relatively recent development.

Perhaps the greatest contribution FRIM foresters and botanists have made to science is the institute's longstanding commitment to a complete inventory of all Malaysian flora. Its 1989 completion of the four-volume *Tree Flora of Malaysia* achieved the documentation of all 2,830 tree species in Peninsular Malaysia. But the last complete account of all the peninsula's plants was published by the great H N Ridley, former director of gardens and forests of the Straits Settlements (1888 to 1900) and director of gardens, Singapore (1901 to 1912), as the mammoth five-volume *Flora of the Malay Peninsula, 1923-1925*.

FRIM has now embarked on a modern revision of this work under the direction of Dr Ruth Kiew, Dr Saw Leng Guan (the current director of FRIM's Tropical Forest Biodiversity Centre), Dr Richard Chung and Dr Engkik Soepadmo. The first volume of this gargantuan opus was published in March 2010. Even as the remaining volumes roll out over the years to come, botanical knowledge is expanding daily, both through field exploration and laboratory analysis. FRIM's work truly will never be done. **E**

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Ilsa Sharp is an Australian writer formerly resident in Singapore/Malaysia for 30 years. The author of a recent history of Penang's E&O Hotel and biography of Perak's iconic tin-mining towkay Eu Tong Sen, she is also a former Malaysian and Singapore Nature Society Council member and is editing a new book on the wild orchids of Peninsular Malaysia for Forest Research Institute Malaysia.



Visitors enjoy the FRIM Canopy Walkway up in the treetops



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## 100 Years of Tropical Forest Research

### The Story of the Forest Research Institute Malaysia

By Francis S P Ng

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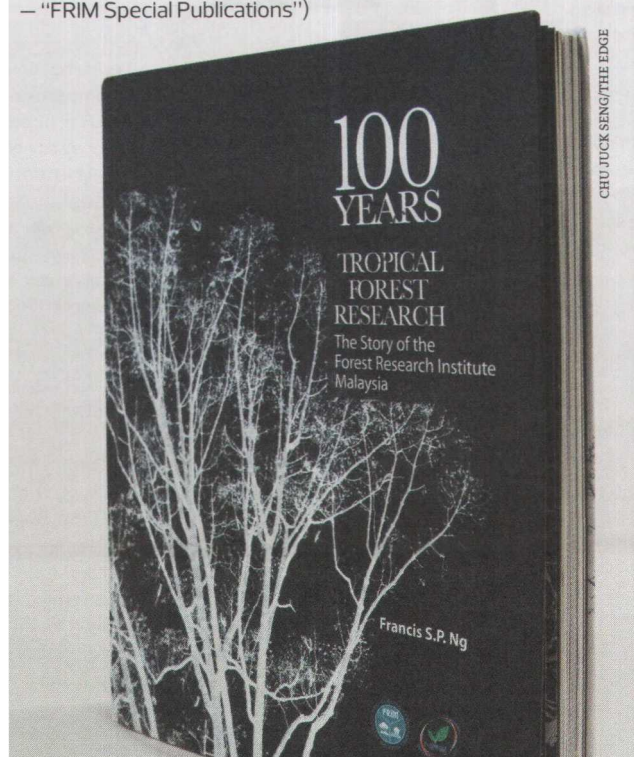
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Top: How FRIM's administrative building looked in 1951 and how it looks now



Left: F W Foxworthy, the American who became Malaya's first forest research officer in 1918