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A date with nature

■ This is the first of two features on forestry.

KUALA LUMPUR: The Forest Research Institute Malaysia (Frim), in Kepong, organised a guided nature walk along the 'Keruing trail', to observe the World Environment Day last June 11.

Led by Frim guide, Farhad, participants of the nature walk made their first stop at a small river, home to three carnivorous fish of the *Arapaima gigas* (*A.gigas*) species.

The fish, measuring about 2.0 metres, are said to be smaller and friendlier than their cousins in the Amazon River, South America. According to Farhad, the *A.gigas* of the Amazon can leap up nearly five feet above the river surface to snatch monkeys or birds for food.

The fish is usually grey in colour, with orange speckles and two symmetrical fins on either side of its body near its posterior end.

A.gigas has a bony or toothed tongue. The Orang Asli, indigenous people of Malay, use this tongue to sharpen knives.

"The fish cannot reproduce here as the river has no sand," said Farhad.

Ten meters from the spot was the entrance of the trail where we were shown two clusters of ficus and giant bamboo. The bamboo trees were planted in 1927, and have grown to a height of nearly 25 metres, with each stem having a diameter of 16.8 cm.

However, a bamboo tree of the same species in Peradiniya district, Sri Lanka, can grow up to 36 metres high, with a diameter of 25 cm. There were about 300-400 bamboo trees in the clump at the trail.

These giant bamboo trees flower every 50-

120 years. According to Farhad, they began to flower in 1951, after which the blooms reappeared in 1988-1995.

The trail also has '*pokok kulim*' or *Scorodocarpus Borneensis* trees, sometimes known as woodland onion or jungle garlic. The tree has garlic-like aromatic leaves, used by some as a cooking ingredient.

Also seen along the trail, were *Dillenia reticulate* trees. Known as '*simpoh gajah*' or '*simpoh paya*', this *Rhizophore* tree has roots that look like an elephant. The stems of these trees are suitable for making charcoal and rafts.

After walking along the Keruing Trail for ten minutes, we were greeted by the scenic view of a valley, dubbed the 'Avatar view' (reminiscent of a scene from the movie 'Avatar'). The valley has trees planted since 1929.

Most trees in the valley are '*pokok kapur*' (camphor) trees.

Farhad brought us closer to the view, before showing us two large trees – the *Merbau* (*Intsia bijuga*) and *Karas* (Agarwood).

He said *Merbau* wood is difficult to source due to its slow growth, but is among the toughest in the world, priced up to RM900 per kg.

Karas, on the other hand, produces the '*gaharu*', an aromatic resin much sought after in the cosmetic and perfume industry. The price of this resin can touch RM100,000 per kg.

We were also shown a climbing plant, named '*akar beluru*' (*Liana* sp.), sometimes called St Thomas bean (*entada Spiralis*). This creeper climbs up in search of sunlight. It provides support for other trees, helping them to be firmly entrenched in the ground.

Some of these root-like plants, though, ooze a liquid which is toxic.

"Do not drink the juice if the colour is suspicious. Place some on your lips first, in order to rule out whether it is safe to drink," cautioned Farhad.

Farhad said the Orang Asli use the *Liana* barks as shampoo.

While negotiating a narrow hill slope, Farhad pointed to a huge tree which secretes a whitish, rubbery liquid – the *jelutong* tree. The liquid is secreted when the stem is scratched, and the Orang Asli use this as a natural chewing gum.

While admiring the *jelutong* tree, Farhad

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pointed to some dry leaves. When we rubbed these dry leaves across our palms, a soothing aroma greeted us.

As we appreciated the aroma of the eucalyptus, Farhad informed us that we were standing at the world-renowned 'FRIM Wow Spot'.

This spot is covered with an enchanting canopy of leaves of various trees. The sky appears through cracks in this canopy, like cracks in dried clay or in a broccoli (cabbage) flower.

These canopied 'crown shiners' or 'jigsaw puzzles' can only be seen at two locations in the world – Frim and Irian jaya in Indonesia.

Those interested in participating in FRIM's Guided Nature Walk can find more information at 03-62797592 or 03-62797000.--
Bernama



A Frim tour guide briefing the participants during the recent World Forestry Day in Kepong.