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# Before it's too late



**BEFORE** it's too late, look for them in the jungle, identify them, take pictures of them, record down their properties as being sources of medicines or of food and drink, cosmetics, or even poison. Propagate the species by marcotting, layering or by planting of seeds.

Oral knowledge about those properties is possessed only by old folks in the villages but, unlike the plants, they die away and their science dies with them.

I'm talking about the danger of losing the medicinal plants and herbs found in our forests or what is left of the jungle.

The speed of recording and keeping the information in permanent form – in compact discs, tape recorders, photographs, books – is imperative. Not just that, the species of trees and herbs must be propagated by proper methods.

At various localities in the state, at present twenty strong, different species of plants and herbs are being protected, preserved and propagated under the supervision of the staff from the Sarawak Diversity centre based in Kuching.

Each species of trees and herb must be sent to the centre for planting under controlled

conditions and for purposes of research – a double safeguard. If the one planted at the locality does not survive the one at the centre may.

The creation of the centre in the 1980s was a farsighted move by the state government. It is intended as a focal point and a world class biodiversity inventory. It provides facilities for research, utilisation, management and conservation of species of all useful plants and herbs – a gold mine of information on biodiversity for reference by budding scholars as well as by the environmentalists. No wonder it is a popular destination for students from Singapore.

A few thousand species have been collected and are being studied by the centre.

To the extent the traditional knowledge documentation may be regarded as a success except for the lack of interest of young participants, but that's hardly the fault of the centre.

The next step of the protection and preservation part of its work will be a challenge for the SBC – that of R&D and commercialisation of the products of the jungle identified to

cater for the growing needs by pharmaceutical firms looking for new sources of medicines. For instance, the humble Bintangor tree has been studied as a potential source of cure for HIV (AIDS). Others ?

What the government can do is to ensure that the sources of the useful flora will be protected. There is a genuine fear that the Skieu (Melanau) or Ketiau or Kechiau (Iban) trees will be totally destroyed as more and forest land is cleared for plantation crops; through logging, especially illegal extraction of timber, the Tajem or the Kong plants will disappear. Safe for the moment will be the Pahkak tree from Kiding.

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Skieu (*Mudhuca* spp) is a good edible oil and is claimed to have properties to reduce high blood pressure and much sought after by early traders to Sarawak. Of course, palm oil is a good substitute, but the Kong tree bark used to produce sugar cane brew by the Jagoi has none. Tajem or Ipoh is used in poison dart by the Penan hunters. If and when it's gone, it's gone forever. And what about the antidote – the plant from which it is derived?

That story by the deputy State Secretary, Datuk Ose Murang who officiated at the opening of the workshop on Traditional Knowledge Documentation about a Penan is telling. The Penan was blow piping birds up in the trees. Somehow or rather he missed his target and the dart fell on the poor man himself. He survived! Apparently, he had found an antidote from somewhere in the jungle.

I asked Ezra Uda, a Penan, and a participant of the seminar what sort of plant from which the source of the antidote was obtained. He mumbled something about not taking Jerangau Merah along with the poisoned dart; nothing about how to apply it on the wound, but this was good enough as a clue. The best antidote is to avoid being shot at with that dart.

All these names are local names and they sound strange to the readers except to the naturalists or the biologists or the foresters who have worked in Sarawak. They are Greek to those outside the jungle communities or even among the Natives who have lived in towns for so long.

#### Cosmetics

Every time I attended the seminar organised by the SBC, I always learnt something new – new names of useful plants

and herbs, their additional uses in everyday life, either as food or drinks or as medicines. Some plants are useful as ingredients of cosmetics. Now you girls need not buy mud – based facials or that based on the Merino sheep fat. You buy herb – based facials.

#### Women Power, watch out

If you had come to the recent workshop, you would have learnt a lot about diversity from most of the native communities. I first attended such a seminar organized by the centre in late 2001 and I have always been impressed with the way the workshop was conducted. The site visits were practical and a bonus. The staff were helpful and were all out to help the participants. Most subjects had been carefully chosen and delivered, not a minute wasted.

For instance, the lecture by Afendi Hussin, arborist at the Forestry Institute Of Malaysia (FRIM) on the use of herbs for landscaping and the talk on the importance of socio economic importance of flora in relation to the Jagoi Project in Bau by Professor Madya Gabriel Tongga were most informative.

You would have thought that seminars are only attended by scholars and academicians, but the nineteen speakers who presented papers at this particular seminar were simple farmers and leaders of each community in Sarawak. They were equally lucid in their presentations.

From almost all corners of Sarawak they came with visual information or live exhibits. For instance, from Bario they came with the Ajinomoto plant; from Kiding with the Pakkak; from Rumah Nyambong, Selangau, with Lemba Kumang;

from Rumah Simon, Lubok

Antu, with Ijok; from Bau with the Kong; from Mukah with the Skieu oil. Others from Bakelalan, Betong, Mulu, Lawas, Baram, Bario, Semadang, showed slides of plants and herbs they claimed to have properties for cure or relief of all sorts of ailments.

They are experts in their own fields in terms of identifying the useful plants for food or teas or medicines, including poisonous ones (to be avoided). No one brought Tongkat Ali. It is in the market.

#### Certain myth exposed

Ong Chui Koon from SIRIM talked about the long process and cumbersome procedure before a product is patented under the Patents Act 1983. In short, not every plant or herb found in the jungle can be patented and declared exclusive property of the finders.

#### Preservation guaranteed

From the chairman of the BSC came the government's assurance that the diverse flora of the state would be preserved through the work of the Biodiversity Centre. The role of the various communities to complement the work of the centre was stressed while the benefits shared between the people involved and the authorities concerned were assured. There exists legislation like the Wild Life Protection 1998 which mandates protection of some 48 species of local plants; all is required is to enforce the law.

The future of biodiversity is truly in our hands as the SBC's slogan 'Biodiversity For A Better Tomorrow' confidently predicts.

*Comments can reach the writer via [columnists@theborneopost.com](mailto:columnists@theborneopost.com).*

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**EXPERT: Libat Tai from Long Kerangan presenting his paper.**