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# FRIM'S rare orchid book wins award

**KUALA LUMPUR:** After 76 years of serving the country, its people and the academic world, the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) shows few signs of slowing down.

Instead, the institute is racing ahead with one achievement after another under its belt.

Its latest achievement was in April, when it bagged yet another international award - the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) award for the Hijrah year 1433 in Khartoum, Sudan - in the Science and Technology category.

The award was in recognition of FRIM's excellent scientific and technological contributions towards the socio-economic development of IDB countries.

FRIM is the fifth Malaysian institution to receive the IDB award since the award was first given out in 2002.

This year, the IDB award was also conferred upon the governor of Bank Negara Malaysia Tan Sri Dr Zeti Akhtar Aziz for her contribution to Islamic Banking and Finance.

For FRIM, the award is merely one of the many accolades it has received in the forestry sector, particularly in the fields of forest science and biotechnology as well as forest and environmental biodiversity.

According to FRIM's Director-General Datuk Dr Abd Latif Mohmod, the institute owes its success to the hard work put in by its staff in research and development (RandD) and to successful commercialisation.

He also attributed the success to the public sharing of R&D and technology-related studies through the publication of scientific and non-scientific articles.

FRIM has published 411 research articles in the last five years. In addition, it has published 99 books and successfully commercialised 27 products.

A rebranding exercise has also helped strengthen the institution, earning it 77 national awards and

62 international ones within the span of five years from 2006 to 2011.

"Most recently, a book by FRIM won the National Book Award under the category for the Best Technical Book, in conjunction with the International Book Conference held recently," remarked Dr Abd Latif.

FRIM had received the same award two years ago for its book entitled "FRIM Tapak Warisan Semulajadi Negara" (FRIM: A National Heritage Site).

The latest offering by FRIM is a coffee table book entitled "Wild Orchids of Peninsular Malaysia" by four FRIM researchers: Ong Poh Teck, Peter O'Byrne, Wendy Yong and Dr Saw Leng Guan.

The book is comprehensively packed with photos and brief descriptions of hundreds of species of wild orchids found in the country, which are currently threatened by extinction.

The book is part of FRIM's documentation project on the "Flora of Peninsular Malaysia," which has been underway since 2005.

"The book discusses, in a concise manner, the future of and threats to wild orchids; the legal issues involved; and the roles of nurseries, laboratories and FRIM research in the survival of wild orchids," Dr Abd Latif explained.

More interestingly, the book introduces new topics on orchids that have not been addressed by similar books so far.

"This includes a chapter on pollination, with rare colourful photos, and one on new species that are also on the list of threatened species of orchids," he added.

Meanwhile, the chapter on scientific research and conservation provides readers with a rare insight into the challenges faced by botanists in carrying out their work.

"The book covers about 450 species of wild orchids found in Peninsular Malaysia, including new discoveries regarding their diversity, habitats and sexual hab-

its.

It also briefly discusses scientific research and conservation issues for orchids growing outside their original habitats," noted Dr Abd Latif.

Scientists estimate that there are over 350,000 flowering species of plants in the world, and about 10 per cent of these are orchids.

The orchid - or Orchidaceae - family is the biggest flowering plant family and shows the largest diversity, comprising at least 22,500 unique species that have been identified and named so far.

Orchids are the most successful plants in terms of survival as they are found everywhere in the world apart from Antarctica, although they do have a climatic preference for tropical environments.

Even though orchids grow in diverse environments, the book "Wild Orchids of Peninsular Malaysia" reveals that Southeast Asia is home to the largest number of orchid species in the world, at over 10,000 species.

In fact, Malaysia has a very important role to play in the survival of the flora, as the Malaysian Peninsula has been found to contain 905 species from 143 genera of wild orchids.

Although scientists consider this a large figure, the real number may be even higher. The writer estimates that there may be up to 1,000 wild orchid species in the peninsula, given the fact that more species are being discovered every day through scientific exploration and lab research.

Malaysians play a very important role in the conservation of wild orchids in the country and the protection of their habitats. Scientists believe that the human role has become even more critical because some 20 per cent of the wild orchid species in Peninsular Malaysia are endemic to the region, meaning that they cannot be found anywhere else.

The coffee table book also reveals another interesting fact: orchids are able to adapt to dif-

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ferent habitats such as different heights, humidity levels and virgin as well as disturbed environments.

If one were to explore the Montane or mossy forests like Gunung Irau in the Cameron Highlands, one may come across a mysterious type of orchid.

Several species of such orchids, which have been classified under the genus *Corybas*, are special and unique because they have a high percentage of endemism.

This species is also very local in nature - which means that it grows only near the parent plant - because its seeds cannot travel

far and because it is very sensitive to environmental changes.

This unique plant grows from tuber roots located on the forest floor and bears only a single flower growing from a leaf.

The orchid is known as the "helmet orchid" due to its appearance. Its leaf, meanwhile, is heart-shaped and grows to around two centimetres in height.

Scientists are worried that the plant's sensitivity to locality and habitat has made the conservation of the species rather difficult.

Unfortunately, the species is also susceptible to the threat of global warming, which has been

affecting weather patterns in the Malaysian Highlands.

In any case, the award-winning coffee table book symbolises the hard work of all of its four authors and FRIM's research team. Although the book was initially intended as a limited edition publication, demands for copies of the book exceeded all expectations, and reprints are now on the way.

Those interested in obtaining a copy can contact Norhara Hussein, the head of FRIM's Publishing Unit, at 03-62797482 or send an *e-mail to [norhara@frim.gov.my](mailto:norhara@frim.gov.my)*.  
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