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Bapak's insatiable curiosity about trees

DRIVEN BY PASSION: Prof Soepadmo has dedicated his life to studying, cataloguing the diverse flora in our tropical forests

TAN CHOE CHOE

PROF Dr Engkik Soepadmo talks to his plants. He insists that it helps them grow better, and become leafier and greener. The plants don't talk back, of course, but Soepadmo prefers their company to that of humans because they give him "less problems".

Soepadmo, who everyone at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) fondly calls "Bapak", has steadfastly dedicated some 50 years of his life to studying, cataloguing and understanding the diverse flora in our tropical forests. He has identified some 56 new species of tropical plants and trees in the process, and at the same time, spread awareness about the need and importance of protecting them.

This is the man who, in the early 1980s, a time when the terms climate change and global warming were alien to most people, was already giving lectures about why and how we should protect our forest covers to avoid the twin catastrophes.

Today, the botanist, scientist and ecologist, who has been recognised for his outstanding contribution to the people of Malaysia through his extensive research and pedagog-

ical work in training some of the most familiar names in botany here, has been named a recipient of the Merdeka Award 2012.

The announcement was made on Oct 4 by the Regent of Perak, Raja Dr Nazrin Shah.

"I don't know how I was nominated or selected. Even after being informed by the Merdeka Award secretariat, I didn't tell my wife, not until I read the official announcement published in the *New Straits Times*," said Soepadmo, 75, when met recently.

Born in Indonesia amidst the lush forested surroundings of Kampung Tegalan, Kartosuro, about 40km from Solo Town, Central Jawa, Soepadmo had to give up his aspirations to be a medical doctor because of financial limitations after his father died when he was in high school.

He gravitated towards botany when he was selected by the Indonesian government to undergo research training to replace the many Dutch scientists in the Pogor Botanical Garden who had returned to Holland. He then obtained his PhD in tropical botany from the University of Cambridge in 1966 un-

der the supervision of the late renowned tropical botanist, E.J.H. Corner, under the Colombo Plan Fellowshipship.

He came to Malaysia when he was offered a position as lecturer in Tropical Botany in Universiti Malaya, a position he held from 1968 to 1978. He then took on the mantle as Professor of Ecology (1978-1993) at the same institution.

Geographical location and his familiarity with the tropics, coupled with Corner's influence, saw Soepadmo's main interest and research activity in the past 49 years focus largely on species diversity and the complex structure and ecological functioning of tropical rainforest in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia.

On retiring in 1993, he became the project coordinator and chief editor of the Tree Flora of Sabah and Sarawak Project in FRIM — a research project to discover, catalogue and describe the diverse flora that could be found in East Malaysia.

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To date, there are seven hefty books published under this project, identifying in detail about 2,200 plant species out of some estimated 3,500 species out there.

"I have been surrounded by trees and forests from childhood. To me, they are my most natural and comfortable environs."

Soepadmo was driven by an insatiable curiosity to know what kind of trees there are in our forests, how do they grow, their life cycles, and what are each of their functions in the eco-system.

"These were the driving force of my interests. And knowing that countries like Malaysia, considered one of the 12 megabiodiversity countries in the world — meaning that per unit area, Malaysia got more species of plant and animals compared with the same area in other countries in the world — pushes me even further to know what we have.

"Because if you don't know what you have, you'll never know what you'll lose if anything happens to the environment."

In that same spirit, he embarked

on another massive undertaking in 2005: to revise the outdated, but critical, Henry Ridley botany bible of Peninsular Malaysia — the five-volume anthology on *The Flora of the Malay Peninsula* that was published between 1922 and 1926.

So far, Bapak and his team of researchers have published four revised volumes of about 500 species, which just covers about 20 per cent of the work that Ridley had done.

This project takes time because apart from research work, Bapak is also spending time upgrading the research capability of some 30 young research officers under him.

A small man of about 153cm in height, Bapak has a head of white hair that is fast receding and bushy white eyebrows. He exudes a slightly mischievous aura as it is easy to imagine those very same eyebrows wagging in devilment when teasing his staff to hurry up with their research work.

His favourite phrase: "At the rate you're going, *bukan saja sampai rambut beruban, tapi bila tanduk keluar dari telinga pun belum habis* (not only will the hair turn white but even when horns start sprouting from the ears, you still won't finish)."

He is completely serious though when it comes to completing his work on identifying and cataloguing the secrets of our forests.

The forest covers of the country is under constant threat from deforestation brought on in the name of development.

He should know as his life's work has contributed greatly towards the establishment of many protected forest areas, including the Endau-Rompin State Parks in Johor and Pahang, the Royal Belum State Park in Perak, the Bukit Tawai Protection Forest Reserve in Sabah and a few more others.

Bapak's heart aches when he thinks of them because many of these areas are in danger of being decimated for their natural resources, timber being one.

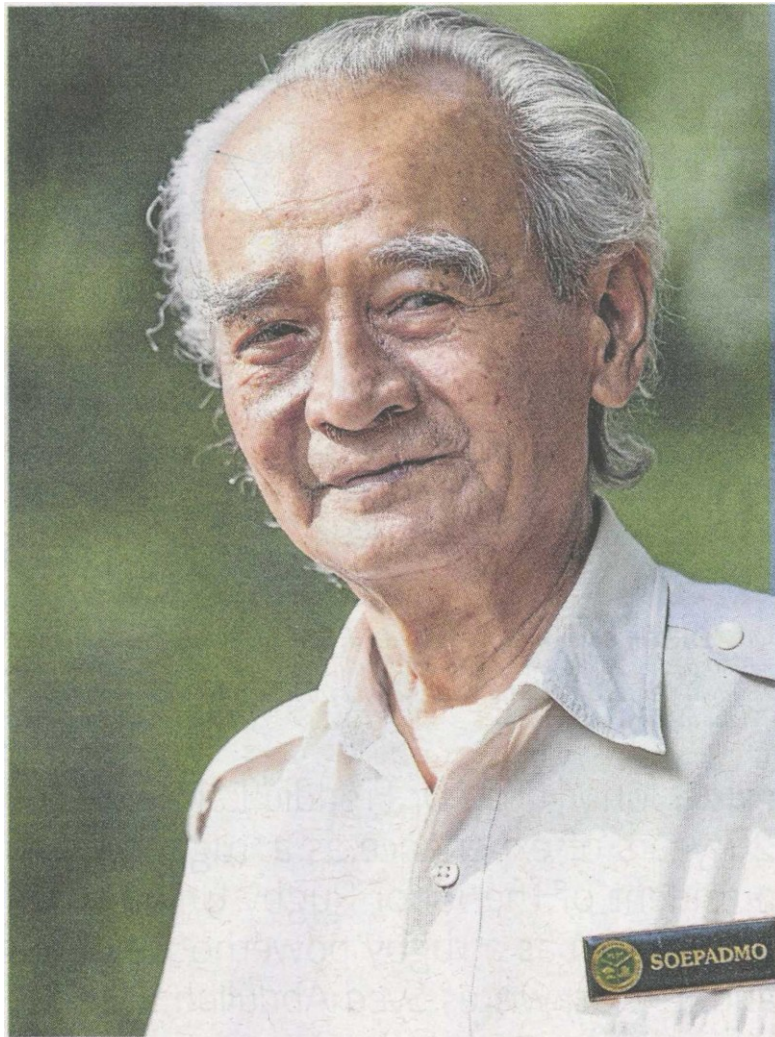
"The worst thing we can do is compare. If we compare with other countries, we are doing fine, some may even say very well. But if we look at what we can and should do, there is so much more.

"I fear that *nanti bila habis kerja, pokok pun sudah habis* (when the work is done, the trees, too, will be done for)."

Perhaps that is why he seems to regard all the media attention after winning the Merdeka Award a hassle. He just wants to be left in peace so that he can go back to work.

"Because if you don't know what you have, you'll never know what you'll lose if anything happens to the environment."
Prof Dr Engkik Soepadmo

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