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# Making a link

Villagers plant trees in palm oil estate to create corridor linking forests at Felda Pasoh Dua in Negri Sembilan.

By S.S. YOGA

**I**MAGINE a scenario where two communities of people are staying in two parcels of land one kilometre apart but separated by a highway. The communities have relatives on both sides and there is a petrol station on one parcel, while the other parcel has a supermarket. However, the people cannot access either of the facilities because there is no road linking both areas.

Now, take that same scenario and imagine that it is two areas of forest that are separated by plantations, roads or other obstacles. This time, the ones who cannot access the other area are animals.

Of course, this is a simplistic view and it is not just about mobility and the ability to access more resources. It is the importance of preserving genetic biodiversity and the need to set aside a large and connected area for genetic conservation, plus sequestering carbon stocks. These are reasons behind a tree-planting project in Sungai Petekah, Felda Pasoh Dua in Negri Sembilan.

In this endeavour undertaken by the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM), Hiroshima University and Felda Pasoh villagers, trees were planted in an oil palm plantation near Pasoh Forest Reserve to form a green corridor linking the reserve with other nearby forests which have been fragmented by development activities.

## Genetic store

Pasoh has been the site of intensive forestry research, having been under the management of FRIM since 1977. As a protected area, it is a rich source of genetic diversity and the scientists believe that joining it with adjacent isolated forests such as Ulu Serting, Kenaboi, Triang and Pelangai will help in conserving the genetic resources of these forests.

According to Hiroshima University professor Dr Toshinori Okuda, the project took off from an initiative by FRIM scientist Dr

Noor Azlin Yahya (who heads the eco-tourism and urban forestry programme) and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) consultant Tatsushi Sugimoto in 2003.

Dr Noor credited Felda for being farsighted in taking part in the initiative to create a green corridor. What is interesting about this project is the participation of the local community, she added. "It was so that they would take ownership of the effort and hopefully, this will spur them to maintain the corridor."

The tree-planting started in 2003, with involvement from the village committee of Felda Pasoh Dua and students and teachers from two nearby secondary schools, SMK Pasoh Dua and SMK Senawang.

In their first effort, they planted 350 trees and the following year, added 60 more. Some 14 species of fruit, timber and other trees were planted along a 1.4km stretch, including *sukun*, *bintangor*, *keruing neram*, *keladan*, *mengkulang jair*,

*merbau*, *kasai daun besar*, *sepetir*, *tampoi*, *kapur*, *gapis* and *balau*.

They did not just plant any trees, but those which are beneficial to the people: *sukun*, and *temponek* have edible fruits; *merbau* is a source of timber and dye is obtained from the bark and wood, both of which are also used medicinally; *bintangor* is a good general purpose timber tree; and *keladan* timber is used for construction and boat-building.

"Some of the tree species were selected by the locals and Felda. Unless the trees are attractive to the local people, the restoration of the ecosystem will not do well or continue for long. This is based on our experience. The key points of the successful achievement of such a project are mutual benefit and understanding," noted Dr Okuda.

Dr Noor said some species were planted because the settlers could harvest the fruits, or because the trees needed little fertiliser and so,

were low-maintenance. She pointed out that the fruit trees were also a food source for animals, which explains the presence of various animals there. From camera trapping and research, the most commonly spotted are long-tailed and pig-tailed macaques, and bearded pigs. There are also pangolins, tree squirrels, large Indian civets, branded palm civets, tapirs, lesser mouse deer and leopard cats.

To ensure a hands-on approach and inculcate a sense of ownership over the project, the local community in 2004 was also given the task of maintaining the trees and monitoring their growth.

What they found was encouraging: about 82% of the trees from the 2003 planting had survived. Further measurements taken in February 2005 showed a 89% survival rate, but this dropped to 79% by May. The team postulated that it could be because the area was flood-prone. They found *merbau*, *sepetir* and *kasai daun besar* to be the hardiest species as all the saplings had survived. On the other hand, *temponek* fared badly, with only 1% surviving.

The team also assessed the perception of the students with regards to the project and their involvement in it. The students indicated that they liked obtaining new knowledge such as learning the names of the trees, and fostering better community relationship. What they did not like, though, were the physical aspects like walking to measure the saplings, and getting water from the river. One-fifth of them indicated that they wanted more of such programmes. In fact, the students expanded on the project by rearing fish in the river and it won SMK Pasoh Dua an award for wetland conservation in 2003.

## Larger corridor

Last September, another 250 trees were planted, adding another kilometre to the green corridor. This time around, the sponsors were

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a Japanese company operating in Malaysia, Kobelco Construction Machinery, and Sugimoto (who was also involved in the R&D efforts of Pasoh). Over 200 participants supported the effort.

Apart from the Felda settlers and students from both schools, there were also participants from Universiti Putra Malaysia, University of Hiroshima and FRIM.

Though the project has generated positive feedback, it has its fair share of setbacks. Dr Noor and

Dr Okuda said one problem was sustaining the community's interest in the effort. They found out that tree-maintenance was not regularly conducted, and visits to the area in between the organised events were rare. It appears that in such community projects, there needs to be regular monitoring by the initiating and participating agencies.

Also, only a single row of trees was planted on both sides of the river, so it is not quite a corridor yet.

"There was a constraint as the

area was already planted right up to the river bank. Next to the line of trees is the road. So Felda agreed that we can at least plant along the river reserve," explained Dr Noor.

She said that securing the planting area was a delicate process as the land had been given to the planters for oil palm cultivation. Thus, the involvement of the locals was crucial for the project to succeed. She added that it would be great if the concept of creating corridors was carried out in all plantations.



**Planting a corridor:** Students measuring a sapling to gauge its growth rate. The trees were grown in an oil palm estate in Sungai Petekah, Felda Pasoh Dua, Negri Sembilan, to link up fragmented forests.



Some of the 200 volunteers - from Felda Pasoh Dua, FRIM, Universiti Putra Malaysia and University of Hiroshima - who planted trees last September.



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A row of trees planted alongside oil palms provides food for animals and is a source of plant genetic material.



The villagers of Felda Pasoh Dua in Negri Sembilan on their way to the site of the project during September's tree-planting effort.