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Ensuring natives do not become bio-piracy victims

KUCHING: The Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) is currently studying a legal foundation to protect the Orang Asli sub-ethnic groups' rights to their traditional knowledge, its deputy director-general (operations), Dr Norini Haron, said here, Monday.

She said the project which came under the sponsorship of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations was to ensure the natives would not become bio-piracy victims.

Speaking to reporters after representing FRIM director-general Datuk Dr Abdul Latif Mohmod to open the National Symposium on Conservation here, she said the friendliness of the Orang Asli had made them susceptible to being robbed of their knowledge.

"Even if you don't ask them (about their traditional knowledge), they will (willingly) tell you. This is their friendliness towards their visitors and

because of this friendliness, (other) people (with ulterior motives) might misuse their knowledge," she said.

She said since 2007, FRIM had been carrying out work to document the Orang Asli's traditional knowledge with regards to the use of medicinal plants, which had so far covered 11 out of the 18 sub-ethnic groups identified.

Norini said the institute targeted to continue with the documentation work on two more sub-ethnic groups this year and another two by next year.

She said so far, lab analyses on some of the plant species collected during the work had found that they possessed multiple potentials for commercialisation, particularly as general health maintenance products.

According to her, FRIM also planned to come up with prototype products of the plant species starting this year before looking for partners to commercialise them. — Bernama