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# Traditional knowledge comes handy

Medicinal tree with commercial potential found thanks to Orang Asli sub-group

## VANES DEVINDRAN

**KUCHING:** Researchers have discovered a species of tree in the wild in the country that possess multiple healing properties including for the treatment of diabetes.

Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) deputy director-general (operations), Dr Norini Haron, disclosed that it was among 10 species tested based on the traditional knowledge of the Semalai, an Orang Asli sub-group in Sungai Bera, Pahang.

"We are looking at various parts of the tree such as the roots, bark and leaves. I can't reveal much for now but it is a big tree, a wild species and a study on this tree had never been done before. It's a new discovery," she told a press conference after launching the National Conservation Symposium 2013 here yesterday.

She said FRIM hoped to come up with a prototype for product development and thereafter, look for partners to commercialise the products.

She assured that the community would gain from the commercialisation as FRIM was also working on the legal aspects in consultation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

"Unlike other projects, this time round, you need prior consent before you go and talk to the community on their traditional knowledge.

"The Orang Asli are very friendly and they tend to tell you things even when not asked. So, there are some who would take advantage of them, and in the end the community won't get anything," she explained.

She said since 2007 FRIM had been documenting the Orang Asli's traditional knowledge of medicinal plants.

She said Malaysia had 18 Orang Asli sub-

groups and to date, FRIM had documented the traditional knowledge of 11 of them.

According to her, FRIM would be working on documenting two more groups this year and another two next year, bringing the total to 15.

"The remaining three groups do not have much (traditional) knowledge to share because they either live along rivers or the sea. They do not use plants to treat common illnesses," she said.

Dr Norini said the beauty of the project was that it offered capacity building to the Orang Asli because under the biodiversity convention, benefits gained from the community's traditional knowledge would go back to the people.

She added that a project to document traditional knowledge of the Malays would begin soon.

She believe her counterparts in Sabah and Sarawak were also doing similar documentation projects.

Earlier, Dr Norini said these projects were vital to prevent the traditional knowledge from being lost over time.

She said the road to conservation was a long but important one and that time was of the essence.

The three-day convention, which was attended by Kuching North City Commission Datuk Bandar Datuk Abang Abdul Wahap Abang Julai, will feature deliberations and presentations on various topics namely the status of wildlife conservation in Peninsular Malaysia, Conservation of Cultural Heritage, Increasing Access to Museum Collections, Utilisation of Sago Biomass for Value Added Products, and more.

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**Conservationists:**  
 (From left) Abdul Wahap, Dr Norini and Sarawak Tourism Board chief executive Datuk Rashid Khan seen at the National Conservation Symposium 2013 in Kuching. — ZULAZHAR SHEBLEE / The Star