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Adding value to forests, sustainably

Vital for FRIM to work with timber firms and land developers

by **Zakiah Koya**

PETALING JAYA: Preserving our forests is a passion of the director-general of the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) Datuk Dr Abdul Latif Mohmod, but he is not one to chain himself to a tree in the name of saving the greenery.

A believer in sustainable forest management and making use of forest produce, Latif said it is vital for institutions like FRIM to work hand-in-hand with timber companies and land developers to ensure all parties benefit.

As Latif had to climb up the ranks for more than two decades at FRIM working on tropical forestry research and development (R&D), he has in-depth knowledge of what would work best for the organisation.

He was the first forestry scientist in Asia and Malaysia to receive the Eisenhower Fellowship Award in 1999.

Latif has also been promoting the possibility of bamboo being the next forest resource instead of timber. He said he was laughed at for saying this initially, but now the idea is gaining popularity, with bamboo being talked about, with the potential arrival of panda bears on loan from China.

Despite his achievements — among them, FRIM being named the best forest reservation institute in the world last year — he said he still has a lot more on his list before calling it a day on the job.

The ultimate aim is to list FRIM as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) world heritage institution. At present, FRIM has been listed as a national heritage but Latif said that is insufficient.

"The paperwork is nearing completion and we will soon hand them over to Unesco," he said.

He said he will not rest until it is listed as a world heritage, as he believes that, only when it is listed will there be a safety net for FRIM.

(Unesco world heritage sites are protected under the Geneva Convention and international laws.)

Oldest man-made forest

Previously a mining area, FRIM has successfully rehabilitated more than 544ha of the site into one of the world's oldest man-made rain-forest (now more than 80 years old), boasting some 15 million trees belonging to 2,500 species.

"FRIM is the biggest and oldest man-made forest in the world. It has become the focal point of how ex-mining land and ex-farming land can be converted into a forest," said Latif.

When FRIM came under the onslaught of development with the possibility of the KL Outer Ring Road cutting through the area, many credited Latif with getting the land title converted to FRIM's name to avert the intrusion.

Although FRIM is not a policing body on forestry, Latif explained that its role is more in R&D and helping formulate policies with other regulatory agencies on forestry. "Our job is to look at all the A to Z of forestry — upstream and downstream," he said.

He said forests are vital to any country because they hold many important resources.

"A forest is a treasure of the country — pharmaceuticals, water and food come from forest. The good thing now is that we have payment for ecosystem use and other countries envy Malaysia.

"In 1992, when (the then prime minister) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad declared that 50% of the forests in Malaysia have to be preserved, he was doing the right thing, as it safeguards our environment and our socio-economic integrity, and it does not sacrifice our timber industry. Today, we have 56.4% of our forests reserved," said Latif.

He said FRIM plays a very important role in the timber industry as it is involved in the conservation of forest, especially when timber products are a key export of the country.

"The timber industry is worth RM22 billion a year. Actually what the government is doing now is not to focus on timber but more

on shrubs, medicinal plants and water quality. And FRIM has to ensure these are maintained to the institute's standards," he said.

He said FRIM and the forestry department "enrich the area" in the forests where the needed timber is found, thus preserving the rest of the forest.

However, as from last year, FRIM has been playing a bigger role in the timber industry after the European Union and the US made it compulsory for timber that is imported to be from sustainably managed forests, tested and validated to be free from chemicals and certified.

"We work together with the Forestry Department and the Malaysian Timber Certification Council [MTCC] to help in the certification

process. They also want to know the origins of the timber — how it was planted, who harvested it, any implication on Orang Asli and such details. We send our scientists to MTCC to check on all this — but it is the MTCC which certifies."

Bigger role for FRIM

Latif said where forestry products, are concerned, FRIM is the testing and certification body as developed countries such as the United Kingdom and the US require a scientific background for such products and FRIM has such expertise.

He also said FRIM has the ability to convince buyers that timber need not necessarily come from the traditional timber trees.

On one occasion, he managed to convince UK buyers that oil palm tree trunks are just as good as wood.

"They had argued that wood should be wood and that oil palm tree trunks should not be sold as wood. I managed to talk to them and show them that it is just as good," said Latif who believes this is another way of preserving the forests and reducing logging in natural forests.

He believes that by showing the public that forests are beneficial in many ways, rather than just be-

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ing a source of timber, it can assist in the conservation of forests in Malaysia.

"If you cut down the trees, you only get the timber. A forest has a lot more things — food, water — as the best water comes from forests. FRIM's role is to tell the public that if one cuts down trees, then those trees have to be replanted. Our job is to choose the right species so that it can benefit the people," he said.

He said FRIM has always worked hard to ensure that extinct and dying species are preserved and where possible, replanted.

"One has to understand that seeds of some trees take up to five years to grow," he said.

FRIM also sends seeds to Antarctica to be planted in time capsules. As Latif says, "No one knows what may happen."

Ministry for forestry?

Latif said it is his dream to have forestry come under the federal government's purview or to have a ministry for forestry alone.

Yet, for now, Latif said there are not many major problems in dealing with different states because forestry comes under the purview of the state department.

State governments too, he said, have been very supportive of FRIM's suggestions.

In fact, he said he is now working with local councils to promote the planting of forest species in housing projects.

All that said, Latif said one limitation is the lack of allocations for R&D work done in FRIM.

"Every time we apply for R&D funds, we are turned down because the focus is more on applied R&D rather than the basic R&D. Biodi-

versity is basic, botanics is basic, chemistry is basic but they tend to forget that these very basic areas are very important for the applied R&D," said Latif.

He said he works around this shortcoming by working with other regional countries which focus on the same areas.

"I am chairman of the Asia-Pacific Association of Forestry Research Institutions and Malaysia is also on the International Union of Forest Organisations. We do have our similarities and we make the same studies. But I want to make sure what belongs to us belongs to us forever," he said.

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