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# Imbak Canyon – priceless heritage for future generation

**I**MBAK Canyon, approximately 30,000 ha in size and encompassing two ridge-top Virgin Jungle Reserves is probably Sabah's last frontier of pristine tropical rainforest.

Tucked away in the heart of Sabah, the biodiversity rich Canyon and unique in terms of geological and geomorphic characteristics, studded with many stunning waterfalls is a truly priceless heritage for future generations. Gazetted as a Class I (Protection) Forest Reserve by the Sabah State Government in 2009, much of the Canyon has yet to be explored.

Efforts have been made to gather information on the area via scientific expeditions held in 2000, 2004 and 2010, and a wildlife survey in 2012.

While the expeditions succeeded in acquiring information about the area, they also provided avenue for networking among local and foreign experts and scientists, namely Sabah Forestry Department, Sabah Wildlife Department, Akademi Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, World Wildlife Fund, Sabah Museum, Sabah Parks, Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Bornean Biodiversity and Ecosystem Conservation, Forest Research Institute Malaysia, The Royal Society, UK, Kew Garden, UK, Kyoto University, Japan and other related agencies and institutions.

The expeditions and survey highlighted the role of Imbak Canyon and its surrounding logged-over forest as refuge for large variety of fauna and home to many plants of which many are medicinal in nature, and used by the communities in the surrounding area of Imbak Canyon.

More than 80 mammal species including five which are listed as "endangered" in International Union of Conservation for Nation 2012 List of Threatened Species are known to make Imbak and the surrounding area their home. They include Borneo Pygmy elephant, Tembadau, Clouded leopard, Hose's civet (endemic to Sabah), Malayan sun bear, five deer species, eight primate species (Orang utan, Bornean gibbon, Long-tailed macaque, Silvered langur, Red leaf monkey, Proboscis

monkey, Pig-tailed macaque and Western tarsier). Of the 26 carnivores species recorded in Borneo, 13 are found in Imbak Canyon, making the Area important site for carnivore's conservation.

According to the Director of Yayasan Sabah, Datuk Haji Sapawi Haji Ahmad, "through the expeditions and survey, we now know more about Imbak Canyon's wildlife species richness, diversity and composition. Such information has not only added toward the scientific information necessary to manage our resources sustainably but it has also encouraged the Government to designate much of the area linking Danum Valley, Maliau Basin and Imbak Canyon, a Class I (Protection) Forest Reserve."

"To date, 317 species of flora have been identified and out of this, 32 species are endemic to Borneo. Meanwhile, 70 species are medicinal plants," he added.

Imbak Canyon is also a haven for birders. To date, more than 240 bird species have been recorded here, many of which are endemic to Borneo, such as Blue-headed Pitta, Bornean Bristlehead, White-crowned Shama, Great Argus, Black-throated Wren-babbler, Bornean Blue Flycatcher, Oriental Darter, Bornean ground cuckoo, Red-napped Trogon and all eight species of Hornbills.

The importance of ICCA is understated, said Datuk Sapawi. "It is after all the biggest area of pure lowland dipterocarp forest remaining in Sabah. Most importantly, it is a water catchment area of the longest river in Sabah, the Kinabatangan River," he explained.

"The central strategic importance of the Canyon would be the availability of indigenous planting materials to support reforestation programmes in the future. Therefore, the conservation area must be preserved and conserved both for its function as a gene-bank as well as in helping to protect the quality of Sabah's river system," he stressed.

Unlike Danum Valley and Maliau Basin Conservation areas, ICCA is located near 48 villages in the district of Tongod, with a combined population of almost 30,000. There are three pre-schools, 18 primary schools and three secondary schools in the district. With this in mind, Yayasan Sabah Group is committed to preserve the pristine forest and develop the community in Imbak Canyon.

● See Page 13

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# Herculean effort thanks to YS-Petronas ties

## ● From Page 10

According to Sapawi, these Herculean efforts requires great amount of funding. Hence, he said it is near impossible for Yayasan Sabah Group to achieve the stated objective on its own.

"Recognising the importance of ICCA, Yayasan Sabah Group works closely with Malaysia's national oil company, Petronas to carry out eight core programmes namely, Community Outreach Programme, Public Awareness, Establishment of Imbak Canyon Studies Centre, Environmental Education Programme, Capacity Building, Ethno-Forestry and Documentation, Formulation of ICCA Management Plan and Research. These programmes were made possible with the collaboration between YSG and Petronas that was launched in June 2011. Through the collaboration, Petronas provides sponsorship amounting to RM6 million to implement the various programmes in Imbak area," he explained.

These programmes, amongst others aim to facilitate the empowerment of the people, particularly the communities surrounding ICCA and the younger generations to conserve our natural heritage so that the current generation as well as future generations can see, enjoy and benefit from the environmental services provided by Imbak Canyon.

This collaborative effort by Yayasan Sabah and Petronas reflects both organisations' commitment towards corporate social responsibility in going beyond business to make a meaningful difference to the people of Sabah and Malaysians at large.

Under the Collaboration's Community Outreach Programme, two facilities - Ulu Kinabatangan Information Centre and Jetty at Kg. Imbak were constructed in 2012 and it was completed in March 2013. With the completion of both facilities, the

official opening for both facilities is scheduled to be held on 13 September 2013. The Assistant

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Minister of Youth and Sports cum State Assemblyman for Kuamut, Encik Masiung Banah, is expected to officiate the opening of these two facilities.

While the Jetty will be handed over to Kg. Imbak immediately, Yayasan Sabah Group will undertake management of the Information Centre until such time that the Porters and Guides Association are established and can self-sustain. Both facilities are located in Kampung Imbak, Tongod mainly due to its strategic location, being the main gateway for visitors to the ICCA.

The jetty serve to provide the villagers a proper place for their boats as well as a safe place to embark and disembark. According to Samiun Bungkias, Village Head of Kampung Imbak, "It is much easier for our people to travel in and out of Kampung Imbak with the construction of this jetty. Now, our people can bring their harvested palm fruits to the jetty, load them to the boat and bring them out for sale. The jetty also provides a secure and well-organised location for fishermen to berth and keep their boats."

The information centre is designed to be a one-stop venue for managing enquiries by local residents, tourists and other visitors to the area. Apart from information on Imbak Canyon Conservation Area, the centre will also provide visitors with information on Ulu Kinabatangan in general, its people, traditions, and cultures.

In addition, the building will be the headquarters for the Imbak Tourist Guides and Porters Association to be formed by the local communities in offering services to visitors who wish to venture and explore Imbak Canyon. Datuk Sapawi said, "The Association's memberships are strictly for people from the communities surrounding Imbak Canyon. This is one of the ways in which the local people are engaged in developing Imbak Canyon."

"We will start conducting trainings for porters by final quarter of 2013. Upon completing the trainings, our local youths will gain exposure and all the neces-

sary skills to become certified porters." He added, it is envisioned that one day, Ulu Kinabatangan Porters and Guides Association will be similar in stature to Mount Kinabalu National Park.

The centre will also sell handicrafts made by the locals, and become a tamu ground every week. Blericia Kamrin, a 20 year-old tuckshop owner, hopes that with the information centre there, it will attract more tourists to come to Imbak. She said, "More tourists mean more business for me." Blericia added, Kg. Imbak is the last pit-stop to get food supply before going into Imbak Canyon. Normally, Imbak's visitors will stop by at the shops to get their supply of canned food, drinks and snacks.

The initiatives – from the construction of the facilities to the establishment of the Tourist Guides and Porters Association are intended not only to increase the awareness on Imbak Canyon but also to educate the public and the communities living in the surrounding areas on how to preserve and protect this natural treasure.

Apart from the information centre and the jetty, the setting up of the Imbak Canyon Studies Centre is also in the pipeline.

The studies centre will be equipped with laboratory facilities poised to become the central hub for research as well as studies on the environment and biodiversity in the area. Sapawi added, "We

hope with the Imbak Canyon Studies Centre in place, it will provide more job opportunities for our local youths without going out from Imbak."

Sabardin Jafar, a 28 year-old ICCA Research Ranger and a local from Kg. Karamuak couldn't agree more. He said, "When we get more visitors be it tourists or researchers to ICCA, it means they will need more porters and this in turn will open more job opportunities." He added "For the past three years, I've gained a lot of exposure on the forest and its habitats. Until today, I still get thrills whenever we discover new species of flora or fauna. With my job, I am proud that I am also contributing to protecting the forest. I really hope with the setting up of the studies centre, more academic

research can be conducted."

Idris Arsan, a 30 year-old ICCA Research Ranger also a local from Kg. Karamuak, shared the same sentiment. "Over the past few years, the number of visitors is increasing and we hope more visitors will explore Imbak Canyon to experience one of the last pristine forests in the whole of Malaysia."

On another note, "I am thankful that Yayasan Sabah Group gives priorities to the locals here to become rangers and guard our very own forest."

Idris also mentioned that his group were among the rangers who first discovered Kuli Waterfall two years ago.

Sapawi states that, "Yayasan Sabah-Petronas Collaboration actively organises dialogues with the community leaders to create awareness and also acquire issues of concern among the communities as well as to garner their support for conservation of ICCA via briefings during the sessions." He stressed, "For us to promote ICCA, a good rapport with the communities, NGOs and other agencies in Tongod District must be established. We need their support, thus we do a lot of engagement with the stakeholders."

Medicinal plants are also the other great potential treasures of Imbak Canyon. This was proven based on data from three expeditions conducted in 2000, 2004 and 2010 which showed that Imbak Canyon has high density of medicinal plants.

Results from these expeditions and known traditional/medicinal expertise from amongst the local communities have prompted Yayasan Sabah-Petronas Collaboration to envision Imbak Canyon as a Centre of Learning for Indigenous Community in biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. Furthermore, it is to be safeguarded as gene bank for the good of the future generations as well as for exploration of pharmaceutical and biotechnological potentials.

Currently, Yayasan Sabah Group is working with the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) and Akademi Sains Malaysia (ASM) in exploring knowledge, usages, interpretation and other

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information relevant to the communities. On top of that, FRIM and ASM are also assisting Yayasan Sabah Group in describing/documenting medicinal plants found in ICCA. Documentation of medicinal plants (Ethno-Forestry) is also one of the eight core programmes under the collaboration.

According to Muhammad Katam, a representative of the Ketua Anak Negeri Tongod, "The villagers must be briefed and given assurance that sharing their knowledge will benefit the community. Once they understand and are assured of the objectives, they will be willing to share more of their knowledge. A mechanism on the documentation must be established to safeguard the interest of the local communities."

Yayasan Sabah-Petronas Collaboration have pledged their

firm unwavering commitment to preserving the pristine ecology of the Imbak Canyon for the benefit of the present and future generations, while opening up opportunities for the local communities in economic activities to improve living standards and qualities without compromising the environment. The collaboration is expected to further educational opportunities for Malaysian, to deepen their collective knowledge and expertise in areas of environmental conservation.

Imbak Canyon is one of the three conservation areas under Yayasan Sabah Group's watch. With that in mind Yayasan Sabah Group always stand as guardian for Danum Valley, Maliau Basin and Imbak Canyon Conservation areas. "We will continue to go the extra miles to keep the forest intact for the future gen-

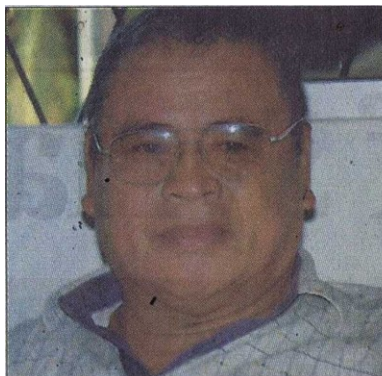
eration," said Sapawi.

Just imagine this - the sun bears dissing its paws into a huge beehive high up in the tree canopy with just a glimpse of the elusive clouded leopard stalking its prey. In the clear pristine streams and brooks, are fishes and frogs of different sizes, shapes and colours. The birds gaily chirping, magnificent butterflies fluttering from one flower to another, agile dragonflies hovering about in the background with the steady soothing sound of Imbak River flowing unceasingly like it has been for hundreds of years only to be joined by symphony of calls and hoots of wildlife in the lush undisturbed green canopy.

Wouldn't this be a fitting legacy for us to pass on to our future generations?



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Md Katam



Idris

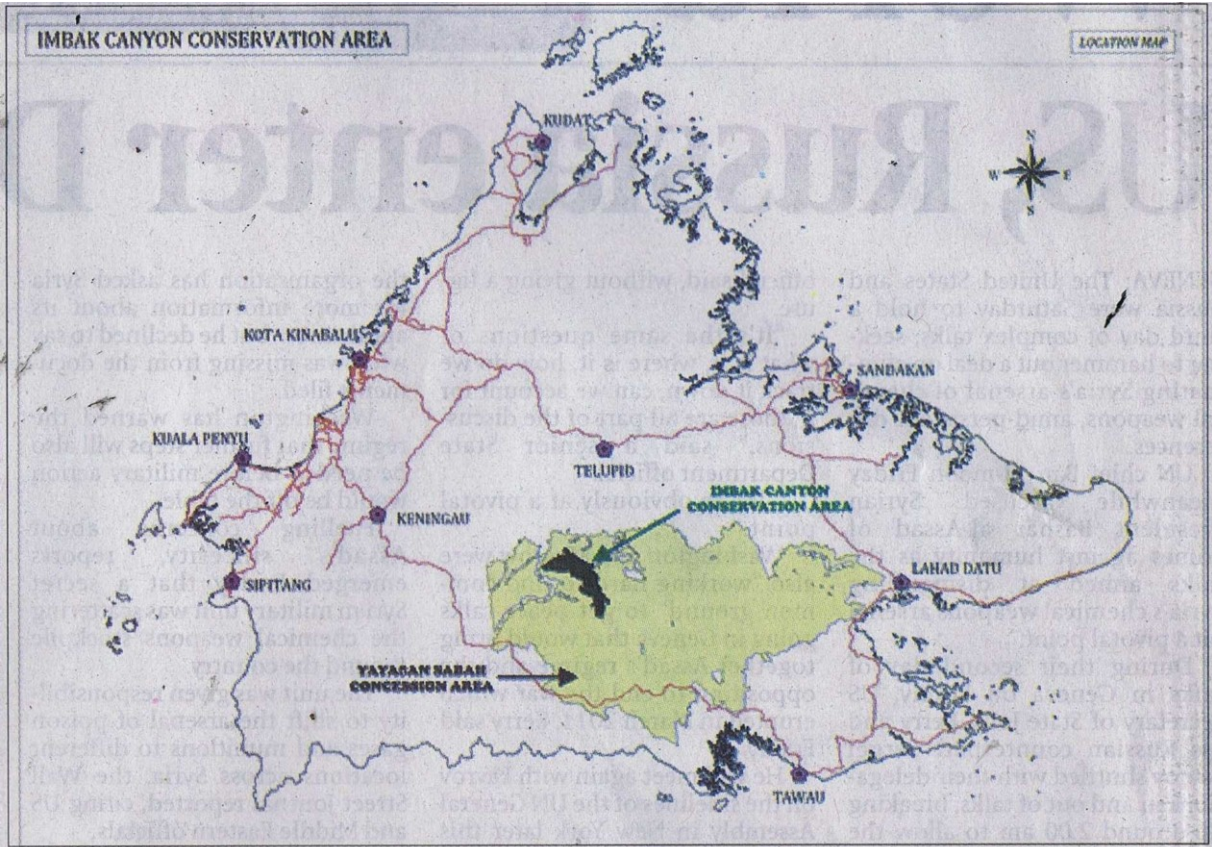


Sabardin





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Map of the Imbak Canyon.



The jetty provides a secure and well-organised location for fishermen to berth and keep their boats.



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The Ulu Kinabatangan Information Centre.



Sapawi



The breathtaking Kuli Waterfall.

Capacity building is one of the core-programmes under Yayasan Sabah-Petronas Collaboration.