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PERSONALLY *speaking*

AGE IS NO BARRIER

By Anna Taing

“Retiree” is not a term one would use to describe Tan Sri Salleh Mohd Nor. At 74, the former director-general of the Forest Reserve Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) is as busy, active and adventurous as ever.

In his 20 years of “retirement”, Salleh has continued to be active in various projects and institutions, predominantly those involved in conservation, science and technology. At the same time, he also found time to smell the roses, so to speak, like hiking up to the Base Camp of Mt Everest in 2012, making him the oldest Malaysian on record to achieve this feat.

But science and nature, obviously, remain his first love. Whenever possible, Salleh says he still loves to go back to nature, especially the forest, which he finds serene and peaceful. He helped established the Malaysian Forestry Research and Development Board in 1978, under which is FRIM, today one of the top tropical forest research organisations in the world.

After retiring in 1995 from FRIM at 55, Salleh was made a “founder fellow” of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia, which was set up to,

“Throughout my career, I have strictly abided by what my late father told me when I was young: ‘If it is not yours, do not take it.’ Thus, I have managed to keep myself from taking what is not rightly mine.”

> **SALLEH MOHD NOR**

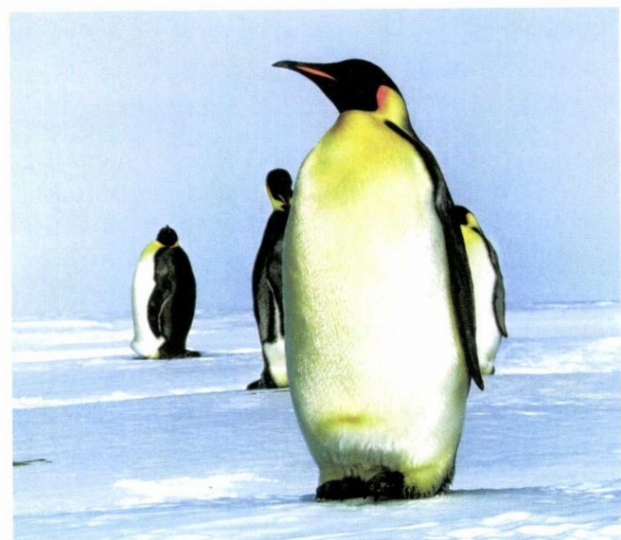
among other things, aid the development of science and technology in the country.

One of his more interesting projects today involves the Antarctica, a vast and remote continent in the South Pole. In fact, his first brush with the Antarctica was back in 1996, when he first visited the place. In 1997, he was appointed chairman of Malaysia’s Antarctica Task Force.

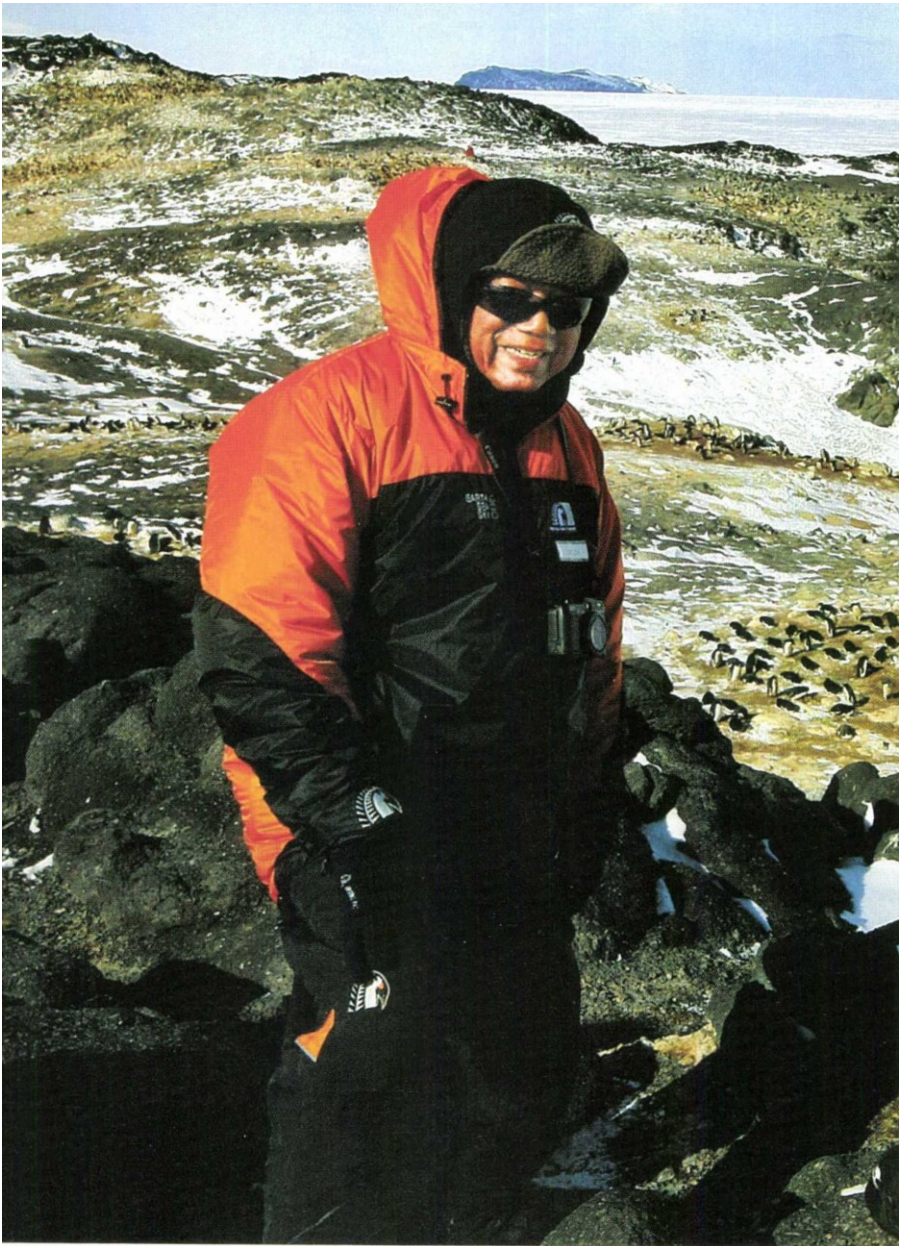
“As a forester, I knew very little of the Antarctica, and there was little reason to do so as there are no trees and more so, forests, there. Thus began a journey into the unknown for me,” Salleh says in a prelude to the book *Antarctica*.

Since then, he has revisited the Antarctica three times. It is not a destination that many people aspire to visit during their lifetime, much less numerous times. Additionally, the sea journey can be harrowing, especially when crossing the Drake Passage, a body of water between the southern tip of South America and the Antarctica.

Salleh remembers expecting cold, harsh and windy conditions during the first visit. But, in the end, “I was fascinated and awed by the beauty of the Antarctica’s vastness — the mountains and the sea and horizon in the distance. Here was a place where the sun does not set”.



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While his first visit was by air, Salleh has stronger recollections of his second trip, which was made with Tun Mahathir Mohamad via the sea in 2002. He writes this in his autobiography, *A Portrait of a Thousand Smiles*:

"The trip was memorable due to the experience of crossing Cape Horn, for the sea was very rough and for three whole days, it [the ship] swayed, turned and dipped and did everything to make our lives miserable. I could not eat, as anything that went in was immediately vomited out. In spite of taking anti-seasick tablets, I was truly ill, which was no fun... it was a great relief when the ship arrived at the calm Antarctica waters and again we saw dolphins and the white icy continent."

Why Antarctica? This is a question that Salleh says he is often asked. After all, Malaysia is in the tropics and the rationale of setting up a task force on the Antarctica

is not something that people see value in.

This is where the "scientist" in him comes through strongly. "The continent is very large and many marine and mineral resources known to man are present there," he explains. The Antarctica offers opportunities for Malaysian scientists to undertake research on organisms that are able to survive under extreme environmental conditions, he adds.

Salleh believes that Malaysia's involvement in the Antarctica allows her scientists to work with other scientists anywhere in the world. This is because as a signatory to the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) in 2011, the country can undertake joint research with other international institutions in the continent. "What else can a scientist ask for?"

There are currently some 20 to 25 scientists from Malaysia involved in the Antarctica project, a number that Salleh says is not "critical mass" yet.

Malaysia's involvement in the Antarctica started in 1983, when then Prime Minister Tun Mahathir made a speech at the United Nations calling for the Antarctica to be a "global commons" open to all and not just members of the ATS only. In 2011, Malaysia became the treaty's 49th member. It is the only tropical country that is active in the Antarctica.

For as long as the ATS is in force, the Antarctica will be used for conservation and research only, which means that there will be no mining or harvesting of marine or mineral resources. However, when the moratorium on exploration and exploitation of the Antarctica ends in 2048, many nations will be keen to have a say in international decisions on what happens there.

According to Salleh, Malaysia's presence, for now, is to ensure conservation and that the continent is used for R&D purposes. 