

Headline	Agarwood's value is also its curse		
MediaTitle	New Straits Times		
Date	04 Nov 2014	Color	Full Color
Section	Local News	Circulation	149,000
Page No	18	Readership	447,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	354 cm ²
Journalist	Rosli Zakaria	AdValue	RM 12,156
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 36,468



Agarwood's value is also its curse

ROSLI ZAKARIA

GREEN GOLD: Grade A agarwood resin can cost up to RM25,000 per kg

A GARWOOD, the green gold of the rainforest, is fast becoming rare due to illegal felling by poachers for its highly prized resin.

In Malaysia, two agarwood species are sought after, namely the *Aquillaria malaccensis* (gaharu) and *Aquillaria hirta* (chandan).

The depletion of the tree and high demand for quality resin meant that the price for agarwood would keep soaring.

Grade A agarwood resin, which can only be found in the wild, cost about RM25,000 per kg while Grade C resin could easily cost RM2,500 per kg. The price is usually doubled in the Middle East.

Sadly, the tree's value is the reason that lead to its illegal felling by poachers. Poachers' usual targets are the dying trees, followed by the next best option, which is to cut healthy trees and let them rot before the hardened resin can be harvested.

Whether it is the first or second option, the felling of agarwood trees is illegal. Since 2004, the wild resources of all *Aquillaria* species have been listed in Appendix II by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) of Fauna and Flora.

Senior state forestry ranger Salleh Endot said the hunt for good agarwood trees was an obsession for some as finding one was like discovering the mother lode of gold.

"But, the depletion of agarwood in the natural habitat has made finding the trees more difficult. As

a result, the price keep rising.

"Alternative sources from monoculture plantation are not of high grade. Yet, they still fetch a high price," he said.

It is not difficult to identify wild collected agarwood from those processed from a plantation. The resins collected from the wild are darker and almost black, while those from plantations are lighter and brownish.

Salleh said forestry rangers had found many agarwood trees felled by poachers, who had left them in the forest to rot, hoping that in six months they would be able to collect the resin.

"The poachers' modus operandi is simple. Encroach into the protected forest undetected, log the tree and get out as quickly as they can. They know the noise from their chainsaws can be heard and easily detected by the rangers."

He said poachers were willing to camp in the deep forest, risking attacks from wild animals.

"But, that risk is nothing compared to the rewards of finding a sizeable resin of high quality. Conservation is the least of their concerns. They just want to make quick cash."

Salleh said to ensure the survival of the species, the Forestry Department had undertaken a monoculture project to plant gaharu trees on a 40ha land in Mercang, near here, in 2005.

More than 30,000 trees were planted and some of trees, inoculated five years ago, had produced resins but of low grade.

"If the inoculated trees survived the process of inoculation and were left untouched for many years, it is possible that they can produce higher grade resins.

"If a tree produces 2kg of resins,

we can get RM50,000 per tree. That is a generous estimate.

"Multiply that with 30,000 trees and we can get RM1.5 billion. That is a lot of revenue from a 40ha agarwood plantation," he said.

"If the harvesting cycle is repeated every year, agarwood plantation could provide a sustainable revenue for the state."

Salleh called on villagers to cultivate agarwood trees on their idle land. He, however, stressed on the need to register their smallholdings to avoid infringing CITES and also to make Malaysia's agarwood trees more acceptable in the world market.

Research by the Forestry Department and the Malaysian Forestry Research Institute (FRIM) showed that the demand for agarwood trees would increase following the expansion of the perfumery industry and its use in the processing of incense.

Researchers also discovered that the trees' leaves have medicinal values and could be used in the beverage industry. This further boosts the value of the agarwood tree, which is living up to its reputation as the green gold of the rainforest.



Agarwood, also known as green gold, is facing depletion following illegal felling by poachers. The depletion has made harvesting resin more difficult, causing its price to soar.