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# A green heartache

It's been another year of goals that have fallen frustratingly short in conservation, writes **Kirana Aster**



The **Sumatran Rhinoceros** will be the first mammal species to **become extinct** in Malaysia if **breeding programmes** are unsuccessful.

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AS 2014 comes to an end, conservationists in the country are taking stock of the successes and failures in addressing environmental issues. From plant life to iconic animals and habitats, the “business as usual” approach towards our natural heritage continue to provide challenges for those working in the frontlines of conservation.

#### HABITATS IN PERIL

With increasing threats to biodiverse sites, the past year hasn’t seen new areas gazetted as protected. Surin Sukswan, a natural resources management specialist, says that several significant conservation areas have yet to be provided the protection status despite many years of advocacy by NGOs.

Among the unprotected areas of special concern are Gunung Kanthan, a limestone hill in the Kinta Valley, the Ulu Muda forests and the seagrass bed of Pulau Merambong, off the southern coast of Johor, which are currently under serious threat from quarrying, logging and coastal development.

Says Surin: “The limestone hill Kanthan is home to rare endemic species such as the Kanthan Cave trapdoor spider (*Liphistius kanthan*), which is designated as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) “red list”. The limestone hill also harbours at least three new species of plants which were recently discovered by scientists from FRIM (Forest Research Institute Malaysia), namely *Meiogyne kanthanensis*, *Gymnostachyum kanthanense* and *Vatica kanthanense*.

“Botanists also suspect that the critically-endangered *Paraboea vulpina* of the African violet family had become extinct on Gunung Kanthan due to quarrying in the northern portion of the mountain for the production of cement. Currently, none of the hills in Perak have been gazetted for protection although conservation of the State’s limestone hills has been incorporated into the Ipoh local draft plan 2020 and the Perak structure plan 2020.”

On the coastal front, the seagrass bed at Pulau Merambong is the biggest such ecosystem (about 40ha in size) in the country, and together with the mangroves of nearby Sungai Pulai (a Ramsar wetlands site), are important nursery grounds for many commercially important fishes. Several rare and endangered species including the spotted seahorse, *Hippocampus*

*kuda*, and the *dugong*, are dependent on seagrass for their survival.

The fragile ecosystem of the seagrass bed can’t tolerate the siltation and pollution caused by coastal development in the area which includes the Port of Tanjung Pelepas and the Tanjung Bin powerplant.

This year, villagers strongly objected to the proposed Forest City project at the Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA) hearing. The controversial project will see four man-made islands built in the waters in Tanjung Kupang between southwest Johor and northwest of Singapore. The project lacked details on the impact on sea life, and will likely lead to flash floods in the area and loss of livelihood.

While we can’t ignore the bleak outlook, Surin says that recent announcements made by the new Chief Minister of Sarawak, Tan Sri Adenan Satem, offers a ray of hope for many who have long despaired over the state of natural resources management in Sarawak.

The new chief minister has made positive statements about gazettement more national parks, in addition to his strong remarks about tackling illegal logging and corruption in the State. He plans to establish another 20 protected areas in Sarawak but has yet to provide further details.

Sabah also delivered some positive

news this year, says Surin. “In a historic event at Batu Puteh along the Kinabatangan River, Sabah kick-started the first officially sanctioned removal of oil palms that had allegedly been illegally planted in violation of riparian reserve laws. A special task force is being set up to reclaim river banks illegally cultivated by planters, and the State’s Tourism, Culture and Environment assistant minister Datuk Pang Yuk’Ming has promised that there’ll be more to come in a move that will help mitigate human-elephant conflict.”

#### PROTECTING NATIVE PLANTS

Data undertaken by FRIM in recent years (FRIM is stock-taking over 8,000 species in the plant kingdom) points to a grim outcome: Many of our native plants are on the decline.

Through the ongoing project Safeguarding the Plant Diversity of Peninsular Malaysia (initiated in 2005), plants are documented in detail along with their conservation status.

Based on the assessment, 97 species (10 per cent) were listed as “critically endangered”, of which 33 were plants

threatened with extinction, while 133 (13.6 per cent) were classified as “endangered”, 148 (15.2 per cent) as “vulnerable” and 29 (three per cent) as “rare”.

Dr Lillian Chua, Senior Research Officer, Forest Biodiversity Division, FRIM, says that the stock-taking is dynamic, with the latest update held several months ago. “So far FRIM has covered only 16 per cent of Peninsular Malaysia’s flora which is estimated at 8,500 vascular plant species. We expect more species to end up in the Malaysia Red List but because of the increase in number of species being assessed, the percentage of threatened species is expected to reduce slightly.”

In the peninsula, many populations of dipterocarps are on the decline mainly due to changes in land use and harvesting. These threats have changed in form and severity overtime. Pristine and semi-pristine lowland forests are now mainly confined to protected areas in national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, State parks, permanent reserved forests and other areas within the Totally Protected Areas network.

Says Chua: “Land is a State matter and mainstreaming biological diversity into land use planning is in its infancy, both at the Federal and State levels. But the level of awareness is growing and there have been more proactive measures taken by stakeholders since the reports were published. Primary stakeholders such as Forest Department Peninsular Malaysia and the State forest departments are using the list as guidance document to help improve sustainable management practices, particularly in relation to forest certification.”

However, she says that if conservation measures aren’t stepped up, species such as *Hopea bracteata* var. *penangiana* (Dipterocarpaceae; merawan ungu) and *Hopea subalata* (Dipterocarpaceae; merawan kanching) which are listed as critically

endangered in the Malaysia Red List will be the first to disappear.

“We can’t afford to lose more plants such as the *Shorea kuantanensis* (Dipterocarpaceae, meranti dammar hitam) whose habitat has been turned into an oil palm plantation.”

Despite no fewer than 230 plant species on the verge of extinction in Peninsular Malaysia, Chua nevertheless remains positive about conservation efforts to prevent more species from disappearing forever.



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**"The level of awareness is increasing fast and there are greater initiatives at the policy ranks to mainstream biodiversity considerations into national and State planning."**

#### ICONIC AND FADING

In September this year, a statement by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers (Mycat) provided another blow to wildlife conservation — the Malayan Tiger (*Panthera tigris jacksoni*) is on the edge of extinction.

New estimates in 2014 by experts put the remaining population of wild Malayan Tigers at 250-340, less than the previous estimate of 500.

This indicates that the Malayan tigers meet the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species' criteria for a "critically endangered" listing. It has been classified as "endangered" since 2008 and the target for the National Tiger Conservation Action Plan for Malaysia to double the population of wild tigers by 2020 is unachievable in this timeframe.

The Malayan tiger is believed to be most threatened by the illegal wildlife trade with tiger parts in high demand as traditional medicine. Intense poaching has reduced the tiger population over the last few decades. Other contributing factors include defragmentation of their habitats and a decline in tiger prey, especially sambar deer.

Among immediate efforts to reverse this situation include the setting up of tiger patrol units in the Belum-Temengor, Taman Negara and Endau-Rompin tiger priority areas, undertaking a comprehensive national tiger survey in the peninsula's remaining forest landscape and strengthening existing forest and tiger conservation mechanisms.

Already declared "functionally extinct" in Malaysia, the Sumatran Rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus Sumatrensis*) will be the first mammal species to become extinct in Malaysia if breeding programmes are unsuccessful.

Their population has dramatically declined over the years due to loss of fertile lowlands for human occupation and relentless hunting of the species whose horns are used in traditional Chinese medicine. According to Datuk Dr John Payne, executive director of Borneo Rhino Alliance (Bora) who was speaking at a talk organised by Mindset — The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus in Kuala Lumpur recently, the low rhino population is a result of chronic hunting, and rare mating. Thus, it's just a matter of time

before death rate exceeds birth rate and extinction occurs. "It's a miracle that this rhino isn't already extinct. There may now be as few as three remaining Sumatran rhinos in Malaysia, two females and one male, all in a fenced, managed facility in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, Sabah."

He says leaving them alone in the

wild and hoping for natural recovery doesn't work. Establishment of national parks, guard forces, wildlife corridors, public awareness and habitat management can't achieve that. Captive breeding might be the last hope for the survival of the species.

Says Payne: "Bora's priority is to produce lots of baby rhinos as soon as possible. Species on the edge of extinction need the following measures to be taken: Increase birth rates, and ring remaining rhinos into fenced-managed facilities and privately-owned land to manage them."

With the development of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) techniques in recent decades, the best and possibly only way is to produce embryos in a lab. Indonesia is now in a better position to take the lead where this is concerned.

Payne has no doubts that Malaysia would be keen to collaborate if invited. He concludes: "Bora advocates for the establishment of a lab, either in Malaysia or Indonesia, in which Sumatran rhino embryos can be produced with an international team of cutting-edge experts conducting the necessary procedures. Imagine what an Indonesia-Malaysia based collaboration could do: The first critically endangered wildlife species to be rescued from the edge of extinction through international collaboration in the species' home countries."



**The Malayan Tiger is on the edge of extinction.**



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Mangrove forests are important **nursery grounds** for many commercially important **fish** species.



The limestone **Kanthan hill** is home to rare **endemic species**.