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# Wild orchid population faces three threats

By Patricia Hului

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**KUCHING:** Habitat destruction, illegal collection and illegal trade - these are the threats orchids face, according to Ong Poh Teck, an orchid researcher from Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM).

Of these, habitat destruction posed the biggest threat, Ong said in his talk 'Orchids of Peninsular Malaysia, Gems in the Forest' during SBC Biodiversity Day on May 24.

"This is largely caused by human activities such as farming, logging and mining," he said.

Building new settlements in town, dams, roads are also detrimental to orchid habitats.

Although our country is rich in natural resources, Malaysians should be careful in managing them for fear of losing all precious flora and fauna in future, he cautioned.

Ong, the lead author of 'Wild Orchids of Peninsular Malaysia' said orchid poaching and illegal trading pose a threat to orchid populations in many other countries besides Malaysia.

"You may still find people selling collected wild orchids in the market, with many people trading plants through social media like Facebook," said the researcher.

Ong, who has published multiple articles on orchid taxonomy and orchid pollination in national and international journals and magazines, said the problem was basically of supply and demand.

Orchids known for their ornamental flowers are prone to illegal trade and are in

high demand; the middleman complying to market demand, earning substantial money in the process.

Ong described illegal collection of orchids as 'stealing', highlighting an unfortunate case where the orchid *Dendrobium roslii* was completely wiped out by illegal collectors.

"It had disappeared from the wild even before it could be formally described."

To make matters worse, this species was not easy to cultivate so most illegally-exported plants that had been collected from the wild died.

He said as responsible individuals, we can do our part to prevent further pressure on wild orchid populations.

Orchid lovers need to know how to differentiate between collected wild orchids and artificially propagated ones, and opt for the latter.

"Collected wild orchids are usually of irregular sizes compared to artificially propagated ones which are uniformly-sized."

Furthermore, collected wild plants usually show signs of stress whereas artificially propagated ones look healthy if the nurserymen takes good care of them.

Another tip he gave was to look at the roots. Roots spreading in all directions are often broken in collected wild orchids compared to those artificially propagated.

As a solution, he said nurserymen need to be shown how to make the shift to artificial propagation instead of collecting from the

wild.

"The government alone cannot solely conserve orchids. It also depends on responsible individuals such as ourselves to make it a success."

He said there are similarities in orchid species between the Peninsula and Borneo Island. The peninsula has about 1,000 species for its size, so Sarawak could have double or triple that number although there is a lack of studies and orchid taxonomists in Sarawak.

According to World Wildlife Fund (WWF) website, Borneo has approximately 3,000 species of orchids, more than anywhere else in the world.

Under the Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1998, all orchids are listed as 'protected plants' in Sarawak.

According to the law: "Any person who collects, cultivates, cuts, trims, removes, burns, poisons, in any way injures, sells, offers for sale, imports, exports or is in possession of any protected plant or any recognizable part or derivative thereof, except under and in accordance with the terms and conditions of a licence issued under this Ordinance, shall be guilty of an offence: Penalty, imprisonment for one year and a fine of RM10,000."

This is largely caused by human activities such as farming, logging and mining.

Ong Poh Teck, Forest Research Institute Malaysia orchid researcher

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Ong giving a talk during SBC Biodiversity Day on May 24.



All orchids are protected under the Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1998, which prohibits collecting or cultivating them by those without special permit.