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'Trees can feel stress too'

Plants need time to recharge just like humans, says FRIM

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KEPONG: Trees feel stress and need rest the same way humans do, and the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) is playing doctor to keep them healthy.

FRIM director-general Datuk Dr Abdul Latif Mohmod said trees in the cities were the worst affected.

"It causes them to fall sick, making them susceptible to attacks from fungi and pests," he said at the institute's open day and World Environment Day yesterday.

He said a tree that looked healthy on the outside could be hollow inside, making it hard to diagnose its problem with the naked eye.

Dr Latif said FRIM used sonar technology as an "X-ray" machine to diagnose such trees.

Research officer Ahmad Azaruddin Mohd Noor demonstrated the use of the device called the Picus Sonic Tomography.

"The device generates a 3D image of a tree's insides, effectively identifying decay and cavities in the trunk," said Ahmad Azaruddin, a certified arborist (professional in cultivating, managing and the study of trees) who has helped local councils manage trees.

"A tree that has become 30% hollow can fall in the event of a thunderstorm. If that happens, it can be very dangerous," he said.

To prevent this, his team would usually prune it to preserve its structural integrity.

He said the team would do its best to preserve a tree due to its benefits to the urban ecosystem.

"We will be forced to cut it down only if the damage is too severe," he said, adding that less than 20% of trees faced such a problem.

"In the cities, it only happens to trees that are more than 100 years old or those with roots that have



Green education: Dr Abdul Latif (second from left) and FRIM research officer Ahmad Azaruddin Mohd Noor (left) briefing visitors on how the Picus Sonic Tomography device is used.

been damaged.

"In the forests, the usual culprits are termites," he said.

Dr Latif said as trees feel stress, FRIM closes its canopy walkway on Mondays and Fridays to let them rest.

"Our canopy walkway can accommodate 200 visitors a day. We don't want to give the trees too much stress," he said.

He also said Malaysians should be proud of FRIM's man-made

tropical forest as it was the world's largest and oldest.

The forest covers seven arboreta (repositories of living plants) and a botanic garden.

He said it was originally an abandoned mining land and that the Forestry Department, which owned less than a hectare of it, planted its first tree there in 1923.

"Today, it spans 544.3ha and houses 73 out of 92 critically endangered plants in Malaysia," he said,

adding that more than 1.3 million people visited FRIM last year.

Dr Latif said FRIM prided itself as a community-friendly institute that facilitated learning and embraced outstanding universal values.

"Because of this, we are working towards being gazetted as a Unesco World Heritage site by 2020."

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