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'National tree can instill love for forests into public'

JASIN: Malaysia is known for its rich diversity of natural treasures, including forests brimming with trees like "cengal", "jati", "jelutong" and "meranti" that possess high commercial value.

Then, there is the agarwood tree from which the agarwood essential oil is derived and for which there is good demand internationally.

If the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) has its own way, one of those trees would have been "crowned" Malaysia's national tree.

"We don't have an official tree or national tree yet, although we have the hibiscus flower as our national flower.

"If we have a national tree, we will have a strong symbol that's fresh and alive to help in our efforts to preserve and conserve our forests," said FRIM director-general Datuk Dr Abd Latif Mohmod.

He was speaking to Bernama at FRIM's International Day of Forests (IDF) celebration at the FRIM Research Station in Selandar, Melaka, last month.

(IDF is celebrated on March 21 every year; the theme for this year's celebration was, "Forests and Sustainable Cities".)

GUAM'S NATIONAL TREE

Malaysian forests not only possess various species of flora and fauna but were also rich in natural resources that contribute to the nation's socio-economic development.

The uniqueness of this country's rainforests is also a major draw for tourists which, said Abd Latif, justified the need for Malaysia to have a national tree.

It would come as a "slap in the face" for Malaysia if other countries picked tree species that were "very close to the hearts of Malaysians" as their national tree, he pointed out.

"In the US territory of Guam, the Merbau Ipil tree (scientific name, *Intsia bijuga*) has been named its official tree. The merbau species, by the way, is found in abundance in our forests and in

others parts of ASEAN. It's a pity we didn't take the initiative earlier to declare it as our national tree," he said, hoping that the government would make a move quickly to declare one of its native tree species as the national tree.

"We should take a leaf out of what other nations have done and have our own national tree too."

MORE AWARENESS NOW

Touching on conservation matters, Abd Latif said public awareness on the importance of protecting the nation's forests and the environment has improved over the years.

He estimated that public awareness has improved by some 60 per cent compared with 10 years ago, based on the number of corporate social responsibility programmes conducted by the public at FRIM, such as clearing garbage from the river and the premises.

"We can also see more and more NGOs (non-governmental organisations) making complaints regarding environmental and forest issues, thus reflecting their growing concern for the environment," he said, adding that better public awareness has contributed to more proactive efforts to conserve the environment and, in particular, forests as they constitute a vital part of the nation's treasures.

FRIM also intends to open up more areas to plant the species of trees that are nearing extinction or have become extinct.

"We are looking at rehabilitating ex-mining land and wasteland and develop them into forests, which can also double up as habitats for animals," said Abd Latif.

He also said that FRIM recently entered into an agreement with Terengganu to set up a research centre at Tasik Kenyir in Hulu Terengganu to ensure sustainable management of the virgin rainforest there and its timber resources.

TAMAN SINONIM

FRIM, meanwhile, has opened a new park called Taman Sinonim (Synonym Park) at its research station at Selandar, in conjunction with International Day of Forests.

The park was named as such because the tree species planted there have local names that are synonymous with places in Melaka.

The main objective of Taman Sinonim was to promote the importance of forest conservation, said Abd Latif, adding that it was also to let the public know of the existence of places in Melaka that were synonymous with the names of the trees.

"The trees being grown in this park belong to threatened species, so by planting them here, we are hoping to save them from extinction.

"We also hope the park can serve as a reference centre for all, especially our future generations. It even has the potential to be a tourist attraction in the future," he added.

A total of 66 saplings from 33 species have been planted at Taman Sinonim, the first such park in the country and possibly the first one in the world that has trees whose local names are synonymous with specific locations.

Among the species grown there are the Gapis tree, which is associated with Kampung Gapis in Asahan; Pulai tree (Kampung Pulai, Merlimau); Merbau tree (Kampung Ayer Merbau, Bemban); Salak tree (Kampung Salak, Melaka Tengah); and Bidara tree (Tanjung Bidara, Masjid Tanah).

"The park is also part of Malaysia's commitment to saving certain endangered tree species and to be seen as a nation that practices sustainable forest management," said Abd Latif.

He added that Taman Sinonim was a CSR initiative of FRIM and that it was being implemented together with the local community comprising teachers, students from institutions of higher learning and villagers. -Bernama