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ENDANGERED SPECIES

POACHERS THREATEN KARAS TREES

Overharvesting, illegal harvesting of valuable trees cited as main causes for their dwindling numbers

AUDREY DERMAWAN
GEORGE TOWN
audreynd@nst.com.my

OVERHARVESTING and illegal harvesting have been identified as among the main causes of dwindling karas trees, scientifically known as *Aquilaria malaccensis*, which produce the valuable agarwood, in the past decade.

Data obtained from the Fifth National Forestry Inventory (NFI) 2001-2013 showed there were some 1.3 million karas trees distributed in permanent forest reserves nationwide.

The reduction was almost three-fold compared with the Fourth NFI 2002-2004, which reported 3.55 million trees in permanent forest reserves nationwide.

Although there is no recent information on the state with the largest volume of karas trees, Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) director-general Datuk Dr Abd Latif Mohmod said Kelantan held that record in 2004.

"Many studies have reported a reduction in the natural population of karas trees in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak.

"The natural standing trees from the forests have dwindled significantly in the last 10 years due to overharvesting and illegal harvesting.

"As such, the government has encouraged the planting of karas tree, whereby the country has 194 licensed karas planters with about 1.6 million trees planted over an area totalling 1,863ha," he told the *New Straits Times*.

Asked if the agarwood industry was facing any major threat, Latif said its production was more focused from plantations with the right inoculum, product develop-

ment and production of oils from low-quality agarwood.

"There is no major threat except that karas planters and producers are exploring business opportunities in India and Laos, using Malaysian inoculum at their sites.

"Some of the Malaysian products could not enter certain markets, such as China, because of barriers.

"We may be able to increase the number of trees, but the quality and technology of producing agarwood needs to be improved for local plantations so that it can be more marketable."

Agarwood is the trade name of a resinous product from an infected tree, in particular the genus *Aquilaria*. The infected tree produces a rich, dark and aromatic resin in its heartwood, usually called agarwood, aloes wood or oud in international markets, and *gaharu* locally.

Latif said the total export for agarwood in 2013, as reported by the Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB), was valued at RM23.32 million.

"However, due to stringent measures and export quota reduction, the export value was only RM15 million in 2016 compared with the total value of all timber and timber products, which was around RM40 billion for domestic and international markets."

Recent reports showed that agarwood export was valued at RM16 million with export quantity of 117,657kg in 2017.

The national export quota for agarwood products, which include wood chips, wood block and essential oils, was fixed at 150,000kg for 2016. The numbers were reduced since three years ago when the national quota amount was set at 200,000kg.

Latif said the agarwood industry was an important and lucrative business although the plant species had been listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES 2010). This, he said, was due to the high demand of agarwood for its fragrance, aesthetic and medicinal value.

Top importers for agarwood products from Malaysia were Tai-



Splinters from a felled karas tree in Bukit Gambir. PIC COURTESY OF GURDIAL SINGH

wan, Singapore, Vietnam, China and the Middle East from 2012 to last year.

Latif said FRIM had put in place a framework to protect the remaining karas trees to ensure they continue to remain in supply.

"Besides establishing research plots in the main campus, as well as at two of our research stations in Maran, Pahang, and Segamat, Johor, FRIM also developed a DNA barcode for karas trees, which has the endorsement of being the first in Malaysia by the *Malaysia Book of Records*, that would be able to assist in the successful prosecution of poachers, which will act as a deterrent to future wrongdoers."



Top importers for Malaysian agarwood products are Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam, China and the Middle East.



Datuk Dr Abd Latif Mohmod