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ON THE RIGHT PATH IN PULAU BANDING

Jungle trails in Pulau Banding offer us an insight into why we need to save our rainforests, writes **Kerry-Ann Augustin**



“It all works like a domino effect — when you have a society that possesses knowledge about the rainforest, appreciates it and wants to protect it, you will see a change in law and public policy.”

Chandra Arumugam

“WE’VE heard a tiger’s roar, but we haven’t come face to face with one. Don’t think it’s a good idea to go on a jungle trek without a guide from the Pulau Banding recce team says, followed by nervous laughter. The guide is part of a team who has been tasked with creating jungle trails across Pulau Banding, one of the many islands sitting in waters of the Temengor Lake and gateway to the lush Royal Belum state park.

Over the last few months, the team has been exploring uncharted territory on the island — cutting through the dense forest with their small parang, risking the deadly sting of bees and poisonous insects as well as snakes. They even bear blisters from

walking for hours on ends through streams and climbing steep slopes. But the trying times are worth it — six new jungle trails have been mapped out and created in time for this year’s Belum Rainforest Summit.

The summit, which will take place from Oct 17-22, will see scientists, conservationists, policy makers, representatives from forestry departments, indigenous communities and NGOs come together for debates and discussions on the fate of our forests.

Part of the summit involves exploring the ecosystem of Pulau Banding via these trails. “Trails like these are a very important part of discovering the wonders of our jungles,” says Chandra Arumugam, the CEO of Rainwalker Ecosystems whom, with the help of the Pulau Banding Foundation, is spearheading the recce team. “It gives us an insight into why we need to protect our forest,” he shares.

LAND BEFORE TIME

As dawn breaks, the melodic song of birds, cicadas and crickets form a symphony of calming sounds which echo throughout the Belum Rainforest Resort on Pulau Banding.

Cradled by hills and surrounded by the lake, the resort is where a group of scientists and botanists from Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and The Forest Research Institute Malaysia are gathered to take on the trails. “Consider this a mini expedition,” Datuk Dr Abdul Rashid Ab Malik, CEO of Pulau Banding Foundation says with a warm smile. “The scientists are going on the trails to find out if there are any new species of flora and fauna in these jungles,” he explains, adding that most of Pulau Banding consists of secondary forests.

Scientific expeditions in the Belum-Temengor forest are carried out every two



Abdul Rashid says the trails open up a lot of possibilities.

years, but this will be the first time they will be exploring what Pulau Banding has to offer. “The Pulau Banding forests have been logged before but it has regenerated since. It has taken about 40 to 50 years for some of these trees to grow back, so there may be new discoveries made by the scientists on this mini five-day expedition,” Chandra observes.

The trails on Pulau Banding, as Abdul Rashid points out, are almost like an introduction to the 130-million-year-old Belum-Temengor rainforest. The area, four times the size of Singapore and home to 14 of the world’s most threatened mammals, is one of the most untouched and unexplored jungles in the country.

“For a long time, the Belum-Temengor rainforest remained untouched because it was formerly a black area,” he says referring to communist-controlled areas during the 1950s and ‘60s. “For now, guests



Scientists from Universiti Sains Malaysia, Dr. Rahmat Zakaria (right) and his assistant, Abu Husin Harun at Banded Trails Mini Expeditions at Royal Belum rainforest.

PICTURES BY HALIMATON SAADIAH SULAIMAN AND COURTESY OF BANDING FOUNDATION

of the resort will have to take a boat out to the Belum-Temengor forest and get permits to trek there. The trails we have created on Pulau Banding are to explore the possibility of finding new species and foster discussion on our jungles, but its function is twofold — guests from the resort can also go on these trails as part of their activity. They can trek and explore this island and also get a taste of what Belum-Temengor is like if they don’t have the time to venture there,” he shares.

“A large amount of what we find in pharmaceutical products like antibiotics for instance, are found in the jungle,” says Chandra, who notes that 25 per cent of modern medicines, including medication for leukaemia and mental illnesses, come from the tropical rainforests.

“These are the reasons we organise scientific expeditions. There are a wealth of things in the jungle and we know so little. In this mini expedition on Pulau Banding some of the scientists will be looking for plants with medicinal properties,” Chandra reveals, adding that the trails can and will reduce the need for boats, currently used to ferry guests, researchers and adventure enthusiasts across the state park.

PATHFINDERS

The team comprises very experienced jungle guides. “Some of these guys are just natural navigators in the jungle. Put them in the city, they get restless. Put them here to mark trails, they are at their happiest!” says Chandra with a snicker.

The hardest part of recreating and creating trails in the jungle, in his experience, is the fact that the area is of mammoth proportions. Chandra’s right-hand man, a lanky guide called Nazme, armed with only a small bag pack and a parang, chips in: “Sometimes there are other dangers too, like the possibility of walking into a snare trap meant for animals.”

Chandra reveals that creating the trails also gives them a hint of what is currently the greatest threat to the jungles of Belum-Temengor — poaching. “When we recce areas, we see plastic bags with instant noodle packaging left there, and they are not local instant noodles. We are so close to the border and there are so many ancient jungle trails which lead to this rainforest,” he says pointing out that the ancient trails stretch as far back as Vietnam. Sometimes, the team follows trails created by the

Orang Asli or tracks left by animals such as elephants, tigers and sunbears.

TRAIL BLAZER

Chandra, a former IT consultant with Ernst & Young, started creating jungle trails in the Belum-Temengor area close to seven years ago but has been leading trekking expeditions over the last 40-odd years.

“We started out creating jungle treks for children,” he says of Rainwalker Ecosystems. He explains that kids, like adults, all experience the theory of fascination. “Irrelevant of age, when you see a butterfly landing on a surface with wings still fluttering, you will feel something inside you,” he says clutching his chest. “That’s what the forest does to you.”

For Chandra, organising trail visits for schoolchildren, is probably the most important part of what he does. “If you look around this resort, you will see that most people who come to explore our Malaysian rainforests are foreigners. This is a case of taking for granted what you have in your own backyard,” he says, confiding that many Malaysians are uninterested in the idea of exploring the wealth of our natural heritage. “You would think children of this generation need their iPads or smartphones constantly, but when they are in the jungle on these trails, they completely forget about those distractions.”

An emphasis on young children being so close to nature like that is something Chandra feels is a necessity. He says: “When you grow up appreciating nature, you will want to protect it. It all works like a domino effect — when you have a society that possesses knowledge about the rainforest, appreciates it and wants to protect it, you will see a change in law and public policy.”

It’s already 10pm but in a little space at the Belum Rainforest Resort, Abdul Rashid stands in front of the scientists, determined to get things done. “We’ve got a lot of work to do over the next five days,” he warns. The summit, he explains, is not about publishing more scientific journals.

“We want the summit to be the start of a long-term commitment towards sustainability. We want the participants to understand why the forest is worth saving.” And it all starts with that trail.

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