

Our nature's pharmacy is vanishing

Explore hidden gems of Sarawak's herbs



DR Fauziah

SARAWAKIANS and the jungles of Borneo have lived in harmony for centuries. And of course, we can't forget about the magical healing powers of the plants that surround us. They're like our own personal chefs and doctors, whipping up delicious and medicinal concoctions to keep us healthy and happy.

It might not be necessary to visit a local pharmacy to obtain the medication you require for aches, pains, or difficulty falling asleep.

Medicine is all around us. Indigenous peoples have been relying on the land for centuries to find the medicine they require, utilising plants to address a wide range of ailments and conditions. But we still know little about the treasure trove inhabiting our wild places.

Pehin Sri Adenan Satem Research Chair, UPM Bintulu Sarawak Campus is currently documenting the traditional knowledge related to medicinal plants found in indigenous areas of Sarawak, focusing on ethnic minorities residing in remote locations, such as the Penan, Buket, Sekapan, Lahanan, Punan Ba, and Kelabit communities.

According to Dr Fauziah Abu Bakar, a plant biotechnologist from Department of Crop Science, UPM Bintulu Sarawak Campus, some of the ethnic minorities discovered have been able to maintain their traditional knowledge and therapeutic practices through oral transmission for many generations.

"Conserving ethnomedicinal plants and



THE research team ventures into the forest in Punan Ba village to carry out their study.



A local traditional practitioner brings the plant sample from his nursery.



A local villager of Punan Ba demonstrates the use of langsat (*Lansium domesticum*) stem bark.

documenting their medicinal plant knowledge is of utmost importance to preserve cultural traditions, medicinal practices, and protect valuable plant genetic resources," Dr Fauziah emphasised.

During her team's recent visit to Punan Ba village, a local traditional healer, Arit Bilong, shared with them the long-standing tradition of using plants for medicinal purposes. He emphasised their effectiveness in treating a range of illnesses, including fever, diarrhoea, cough, and skin diseases.

"I have never had to go to the hospital since I discovered the healing power of plants found in the forest or our own backyards. These natural remedies have been incredibly effective in treating a range of ailments I experience."

In his 74 years, Arit said he has seldom been admitted to a hospital or consulted a medical doctor for any ailment that afflicted him.

Dr Fauziah said based on her research finding, one of the medicinal plants commonly used by ethnic minorities is the root of *Curcuma zedoaria* Roscoe, which is believed to have healing properties for diabetes. The consumption process is incredibly convenient. This product is designed to be easily chewed and consumed. Some practitioners have found that boiling the water of the root can provide relief for joint sprains or pain.

"Furthermore, they are also utilising boiled water from Munang leaves (*Vitex pinnata*) to address high fever, boiled water from Langsat stem bark (*Lansium domesticum*) to alleviate excessive menstrual bleeding, gastric issues, and hematuria, along with numerous other traditional remedies that incorporate a wide range of forest herbs," she said.

She highlighted the importance of Sarawak tapping into the potential of utilising plant-based traditional medicine from various ethnic groups that has been preserved over time. As part of the research funded by the Pehin Sri Adenan Satem Research Chair, she and her team are currently conducting scientific analysis on several medicinal plants in the laboratory. Their goal is to identify the active ingredients and confirm the medicinal benefits of these plants.

In addition, Dr Fauziah suggests that Sarawak has the potential to utilise its rich biodiversity to achieve Sustainable Development Goals in the field of health. However, it is crucial to ensure the conservation and responsible use of bioresources to avoid overexploitation.