

# FRIM to preserve endangered agarwood species

## Rare flora found again last year after being elusive for more than a century

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**PETALING JAYA:** Works have begun to cultivate and preserve a critically-endangered agarwood species, which has been elusive for more than a century until it was found in Terengganu last year.

The Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) has taken on the task to collect and grow the *Aquilaria rostrata* in its *ex situ* conservation site, joining 73 other endangered, rare and threatened flora species.

"FRIM is always prepared to assist in any way we can to help conserve and preserve vulnerable species," said director-general Datuk Dr Abd Latif Mohmod.

The tree was first discovered in 1911 by English botanist H.N. Ridley and believed to be native only to Wray's Camp in Taman Negara.

In April last year, two Forestry Department rangers found what they believed to be the species in Besut, Terengganu, some 100km away from where it was first discovered.

Universiti Putra Malaysia confirmed the findings.

A specimen was later sent to FRIM's herbarium, courtesy of the Pahang State Forestry Department.

FRIM forest plantation expert Dr Lok Eng Hai said the *Aquilaria rostrata*, along with seven other agarwood-producing species, had not been thoroughly studied.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species, the plant was labelled Data Deficient, said Dr Lok, adding that its population could further decline due to unsustainable resin collection.

To help preserve it, Lok believed that it was

possible to domesticate the rare species, based on his interactions with local agarwood planters.

"There is a need to relocate this species in the wild, properly assess its status and domesticate as well as understand its ecology distribution."

Therefore, more collaborative projects and financial support would be required, he said.

On sustainable management and optimal use of forest resources in Malaysia, Forest Biodiversity director Dr Lilian Chua pointed out that plant populations played crucial ecological roles in the functioning of ecosystems and landscapes.

"An ecosystem that functions well provides us with clean water and air, and regulates other environmental functions optimally," she said.

However, the research institute faces tough challenges in its work to preserve threatened flora, especially issues about land.

Dr Chua said lands were often excised from the forest landscape without an understanding of its biological diversity content, a fact made worse by a lack of proper coordination between state planning and implementing agencies.

FRIM is an agency under the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry to promote sustainable management and optimal use of forest resources via research.

The institute's herbarium contains 300,000 specimens collected from all over the country in collaboration with forestry departments, universities and other agencies.

These specimens are documented and carefully stored for reference, research and conservation.