

Karas rediscovered

PRECIOUS COMMODITY: UPM scientists find previously thought extinct tree

RESearchers from Universiti Putra Malaysia have rediscovered the *Aquilaria rostrata* forest tree species, which is endemic to Peninsular Malaysia. The *Aquilaria* genus tree was last found about 100 years ago and is known to produce high-quality agarwood, reputed to be the most expensive wood in the world.

The team found the tree, which is also known as karas gunung or chandan gunung, at the forested Gunung Tebu, Besut, about 100km from its origin in Gunung Tahan, Pahang.

Associate Professor Dr Rozi Mohamed from the Department of Forest Management, Faculty of Forestry led the research team which discovered the tree population during a field trip last year. The Tereng-

ganu Forestry Department rangers were also instrumental in the find.

The team initially believed they had found a new tree species when the discovery was first made, but Dr Rozi said: "After making comparisons with a 100-year-old specimen at Herbarium Botanic Gardens, Singapore, we discovered that it was the *A. rostrata*".

She added that the tree was found among felled timber at about 700m above sea level. There were an estimated 50 agarwood trees, measuring between 2 and 5m tall and with a diameter at breast height (DBH) of between 3 and 4cm — all were flowering and fruiting.

Dr Rozi said it was H.N. Ridley who first found the species at Wray's Camp, Gunung



Dr Rozi with the dried leaves of the *Aquilaria rostrata* tree.

Tahan in 1911. However, the sizes of the trees were not specified in the 1924 report.

The tree has been named under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List as it was believed to be nearing extinction after more than 100 years since its discovery.

Dr Rozi credits sustainable logging for leading the UPM research team to the habitat of the species and expressed hope that the area will be safeguarded against agarwood loggers.

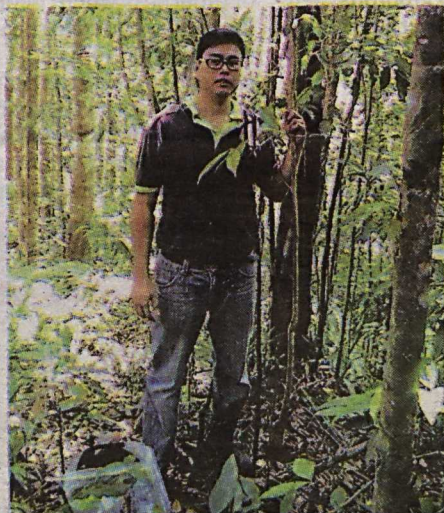
The research was carried out under a Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) of the Higher Education Ministry. All information is keyed into a DNA database especially for *Aquilaria* at the Forestry Biotechnology Laboratory of UPM's Faculty of Forestry.

The findings were also reported in *Blumea*, an international journal on plant taxonomy by Leiden University, Netherlands.

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Leaves and fruit of the tree.



A research team member with an *Aquilaria rostrata* tree.