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**W**HEN a species of animal or plant is greatly reduced, it can affect the function of other animals and plants, thereby wreaking havoc in the ecosystem.

Such is the case of pangolins in the forests of Batang Padang, Perak, where its population is dwindling.

Pangolins, a wildlife species endangered by poaching and smuggling due to its high value, act as a biological control for termites that destroy trees in the forest.

Associate Professor Dr Lau Wei Hong of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) said Batang Padang is a poaching hotspot, where locals can trap and sell a pangolin for between RM1,000 and RM1,500.

"Pangolins are natural predators of termites in the forest. The Semai community in Batang Padang is aware that hunting pangolins is illegal.

"The Batang Padang Orang Asli Welfare Society was established to care for the Semai community and improve the livelihood of its members," said the lecturer from UPM's Department of Plant Protection in the Faculty of Agriculture.

"Most of the Semai people grow cash crops and collect non-timber forest products like rattan, bamboo, durian and petai to earn income."

She said due to the illegal hunting of pangolins, the number of termite mounds in the forest and silviculture areas in Batang Padang has increased.

"Termite damage has affected the economy of the local community. The situation is made worse by the lack of conservation programmes in Malaysia.

"The Batang Padang Orang Asli Welfare Society is seeking a preventive measure to address this issue. This is to improve the welfare and livelihood of the Semai community in harmony with the environment."

Responding to that call, UPM organised a community project called the "Community-based Conservation of Pangolins for Termite Control Among the Batang Padang Semai Tribe" at SK Batu 14 in Tapah, Perak, recently.

The project, which involved 870 participants, was sponsored by UPM under its Knowledge Transfer Grant Scheme.

It was jointly organised by UPM, the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan), the Batang Padang Orang Asli Welfare Association and the school administration.

Lau, who is project leader, said the knowledge transfer grant aims to expand the university's role in disseminating knowledge and information to improve lives.

"It is the consolidated effort of a great



(From left) Perhilitan officer Muhammad Hanif Ghazali, Universiti Putra Malaysia Forestry Faculty dean Professor Dr Mohamed Zakaria Hussin, Perak Religious and Islamic Education, Rural and Entrepreneur Development Committee chairman Asmuni Awi and UPM University Community Transformation Centre deputy director Professor Dr Uma Rani Sinniah at UPM's community project on pangolin conservation in SK Batu 14, Tapah, Perak.

## Protecting pangolins in Batang Padang

team, comprising Professor Dr Mohamed Zakaria Hussin, UPM's expert in wildlife management; Tan Poai Ean, Perhilitan's expert in mammal ecology and wildlife management; and, Mohd Khairulnazar Isa, UPM's research assistant in pest control.

"The Batang Padang Orang Asli Welfare Society was also involved, led by its president, Nur Sayang Abdullah, and secretary Teratai Bah Arom," Lau said.

To make the programme exciting, UPM organised a drawing competition and an event called the "Pangolin Conservation Project" for Orang Asli pupils at the school.

Both activities also aimed to promote a love for wildlife.

There were dancing and singing performances themed around the pangolin, in which the Semai pupils had fun participating. Other activities included surveys, making pangolin origami, guessing the num-

ber of pangolin scales, blowpiping and mini exhibitions.

"Hopefully, the project will provide opportunities for universities, schools and communities to collaborate with the authorities in conservation efforts in Batang Padang for the wellbeing of the Semai community," said Lau.

As a follow-up to the community project, she said the UPM team would train teachers and members of the Orang Asli Welfare Society of Batang Padang in developing educational programmes on pangolin conservation.

"We also conduct skills training programmes to equip them with knowledge in pangolin conservation and termite control.

"Emphasis will be given to students as we believe that education is the best approach to impart knowledge on wildlife conservation and help them to connect with nature."

Lau said conservation of endangered species and the environment is at the top of her faculty's agenda.

"UPM aims to promulgate the potential (of its community project in Batang Padang) as a forest and agriculture model for education and research at the global level. The project is the first of its kind for UPM and Perhilitan.

"We are putting up a workable model to involve the local community directly, with hope that the initiative will be sustained. The community will benefit from it because it is an initiative by the community for the community."

Among the conservation efforts for endangered species undertaken by UPM are the wildlife viaduct crossing in Grik, Perak; forest rehabilitation for wildlife and habitat conservation of wetland birds in Selangor; hornbill ecology conservation in Royal Belum Forest; and, the pangolin programme in Batang Padang.



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Members of the Batang Padang Orang Asli Welfare Society.