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AS the Jahai Orang Asli of Kampung Sungai Klewang have shown, reforestation is not solely an activity for state authorities to undertake.

Creative designers and goat farmers Abdul Razak Abdul Aziz, 60, and his wife Intan Zarinah, 59, established the Social Eco Enterprise Development for Sustainability (SEEDS Malaysia), a natural farming and sustainable living centre in Klang, Selangor, in 2017.

"We've always felt connected with trees and nature," recalls Abdul Razak.

He remembers fondly how they memorialised their eldest son's birth: "We printed an announcement with a packet of forest palm seeds to give to everyone so they could plant a tree."

"With climate change, people say one of the best things to do is to plant trees. So let's do whatever it takes," he adds.

Sitting on the steps of their office upcycled from shipping containers, Razak and Intan tell how they became avid seed collectors.

It was Malaysia's 100 Million Tree-Planting Campaign 2021-2025 that kickstarted the Voluntary Dipterocarp Seed Project, a collaboration between SEEDS Malaysia and the Tropical Rainforest Conservation and Research Centre.

"We aim to close the gap between conservation practitioners and the public interested in conservation action," explains Afzaa Aziz, a project manager at the centre who ran a series of online workshops covering seed surveys, collection protocols, processing, care and replanting techniques.

It was a time-sensitive mission complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic that began in March 2020 and triggered a lockdown that didn't allow any travel.

"When the mission is big enough you just have to find the means," recalls Abdul Razak. He and his friends mobilised seed collectors to pick up seeds in various states from roadsides and community and private forests following the centre's collection protocols.

"You help nature by taking half of it (the seeds)," Abdul Razak explains. "You must tag the tree's geographical location, take a picture of the bark, collect some leaves

Citizen conservationists



Abdul Razak and Intan have always felt connected with trees and nature. — Photos: LEONG HON YUEN

along with the seeds and pass it all to the authorities."

Afzaa adds that the centre also provides technical support and knowledge transfer to individuals who want to restore degraded land.

"The beauty of ecosystem restoration is that everybody has a part to play," says Afzaa.

Abdul Razak agrees, adding that they were able to germinate at least 50% of the seeds collected, in some cases 80%, with the help of the centre's training.

At Seeds, Abdul Razak glances over rows of kapur (*Dryobalanops aromatica*) seedlings in their polybags, successfully grown from seeds collected at Rimbun Dahan, a private arts centre in Kampung Chempedak, Selangor. He believes that planting on private land will help ensure its survival.

"The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is now," Abdul Razak says.

"Just do it. Any tree — a rose, a fruit tree, a dipterocarp tree, but not those artificial trees with neon lights!"

Capturing carbon

When Angela Hijias, 72, started planting rainforest trees in her 5.6ha former orchard at Rimbun

Dahan three decades ago, little did she realise the challenges of growing dipterocarp trees that today tower over the home she shares with renowned architect Hijias Kasturi.

Angela's regional collection of over 800 species of tropical rainforest trees and plants is largely 90% Peninsular Malaysia species.

The collection rewards her with a sense of place — but it also deprives her of sound sleep.

"I have learned from bitter experience that you can't plant trees close to buildings," she admits, explaining that she only became aware of the problem nine years into planting.

Tropical rainforest trees self-prune: When they grow to a certain height, the canopy shades the lower branches; when these no longer receive enough sunlight, their leaves fall off and the dead branch drops off.

"That's how you get very tall, straight trees that are much prized by loggers because for 60m, it's just plain trunk with a little bubble of leaf at the top," Angela explains.

"It's hardwood and it comes down like a spear. The branches can drop even when it's not windy. We've had broken roofs and lost several windscreens," she winces.

Angela recommends a barrier of at least 10m between the edge of a building and a rainforest tree.

"Forest trees need little attention; once planted and regularly mulched with dead leaves, they look after themselves," says Angela, adding that her decision to grow big trees was reinforced by the desire to capture carbon.

It's the height of the trunk that captures the greatest amount of carbon, but when trees find a gap in the forest canopy, they grow branches.

"So I'm densely planting, forcing them to grow as tall as possible before they branch," explains Angela.

She has opened her grounds to interested seed collectors: "We act like a clearing house for seeds, but they have a very limited viability. So you've got to get them out pretty quickly," she says.

"I've been propagating, that's been one of my projects during lockdown, planting the seeds in sand beds, watering them twice a day, then transplanting them later," says Angela.

Biodiversity of a planted forest

Seated in his airy 18m-long sitting room with French windows letting in light and breeze from the hills of Pahang, retiree Henry Barlow, 77, gingerly extends the wings of a moth that is barely an inch wide, working to secure it to a board with a pin.

Barlow has been collecting and preserving moths and butterflies

Walk among trees

On March 19, beginning at 9.30am, and in conjunction with International Day of Forests 2022, Angela Hijias will be giving a guided walk at Rimbun Dahan, Kampung Chempedak, Selangor, on planting an indigenous landscape. Visit pokokhutan.my to register.

for the past five decades at the 38ha Genting Tea Estate.

"Insects form one of the basic building blocks of all natural ecosystems," says Barlow, who started chasing cabbage white butterflies as a child in Britain.

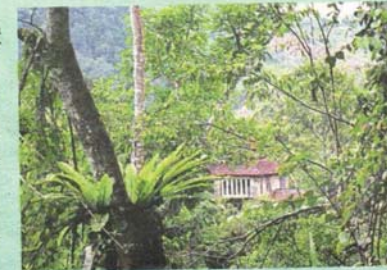
The estate is located in the middle of the Titiwangsa Mountain Range.

"It's right on the spine of the Titiwangsa range," Barlow says. "We look out onto a valley, which was cleared of primary forest by loggers about eight or 10 years ago. This is actually the watershed between the East and West Coast."

"If you look at the list of trees that we've got planted and compare it with the classification in the new edition of Symington's *Foresters' Manual of Dipterocarps*, you can see that, in many cases, these species are regarded as extinct or near extinct in the wild or severely endangered almost invariably, because of the loss of their natural habitat," he says.

Today, the estate is effectively an island of planted rainforest in a sea of vegetable production.

Barlow is a chartered accountant by training but in three decades he grew a rainforest — an arboretum specialising in rare and endangered



The Genting Tea Estate bungalow is set within 38ha of planted rainforests and 100-year-old secondary forests in the middle of Titiwangsa Mountain Range.

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Angela (left) with her first tree, a meranti tembaga which is now 20m tall and more than 2m round, and (above) with a *Horsfieldia superba*, a species endemic to Peninsular Malaysia.

Peninsular Malaysia trees, especially dipterocarps. He hopes that when they flower and fruit, they will be a source of seeds for those wishing or needing to reforest land with indigenous tree species.

There's no guarantee trees will produce seeds in one's lifetime. Trees have their own timelines, he observes.

One or two species of dipterocarps have produced fertile seeds as young as eight years old, while others planted 30 years ago have not produced any at all. Inexplicably, some flower very profusely, then all the flowers fall off and they don't set seeds, Barlow says.

Of the 160 species of dipterocarp



Barlow with seeds he collected while surveying moth larvae.

planted, only about 50 species have so far set fertile seed.

"This is a tremendous feat given the relatively short time since the reforestation work started," says Elango Velautham, a friend of Barlow and Angela's who was formerly with the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia and is now a Singapore-based conservationist – he provides them with the knowledge to manage tree rarities.

Barlow says that afforestation alone will not bring back the original biodiversity of a primary forest unless seeds get brought in from other patches of forest. Only then may biodiversity be sustained.

One day, Barlow hopes that the estate will become a training and education hub for the Danum Valley-based South-East Asia Rainforest Research Partnership.

Nurturing rainforests is a lifetime passion. Knowing how difficult it is to get trees to produce viable seeds, it is important to safeguard primary forests, replant deforested areas, and manage them sustainably to ensure a future for trees and diverse flora and fauna.

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