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An oriental pied hornbill sighted at one of Sime Darby Plantation's oil palm estates

Leading by example

As the world's largest producer of certified sustainable palm oil, Sime Darby Plantation Bhd believes that it has a role to play not only in driving deforestation out of its supply chain but also in contributing to reforestation and biodiversity conservation

When Sime Darby Plantation Bhd (SDP), one of the founding members of the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), embarked on its first tree-planting initiative in 2008, it was a conservation exercise to protect the ecosystems and biodiversity surrounding its operations.

Fast forward to 2022, the "Plant-a-Tree" initiative has planted close to 1.9 million forest trees and led to a programme to create a live seed bank for tree species (including endangered, rare and threatened species) as well as carbon sinks within its areas. By 2025, the company plans to plant a total of three million trees.

Chief sustainability officer Rashyyid Redza Anwarudin says over the years, SDP's commitments to no deforestation, no exploitation and no peat (NDPE), as well as various current challenges surrounding climate change and human rights, have shaped and redefined its own priorities on sustainability.

One of SDP's priorities today is achieving net-zero emissions across its entire value chain by 2050. "An important part of our net zero target is the initiative to reduce 50% of our carbon emissions by 2030 via the implementation of renewable solutions and to implement nature-based solutions to increase carbon sequestration such as large-scale tree-planting"

And in furthering its commitment to biodiversity conservation, he points out that to date, close to 47,000ha of land within SDP's operations have been identified and set aside as high conservation value (HCV) areas.

These include land classified as "unplantable

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reserves”, which are areas that are unproductive or unsuitable for oil palm planting, namely terrain with slopes greater than 25°, ponds, ravines and swamps, among others. These HCV areas, he says, will remain as conservation areas indefinitely.

“Since we declare these areas to the RSPO, they are audited regularly to ensure that they are well maintained and remain conserved,” he says, adding that all conservation and reforested areas are monitored and maintained by the operating units where they are located. These initiatives include biodiversity assessments, boundary marking and continuous surveillance to prevent illegal activity. By geo-tagging the trees, SDP’s conservation and biodiversity team is also able to monitor the survival of the trees planted.

Apart from protecting and restoring areas that have conservation potential, equally critical to SDP’s tree planting and conservation activities is connecting areas that have the potential to be connected to important habitats, landscapes and ecosystems. “We are currently looking at our conservation areas that are close to the Central Forest Spine [in Peninsular Malaysia], for example, or larger ecosystems to see how we can connect them. And we are not stopping there. We will continue to look for more areas that we can conserve within our operations,” he says.

SUCCESS STORIES

Over the years, SDP’s tree planting projects have had a positive impact on biodiversity. An increase in bird species has been observed at its estates. At the orangutan habitat conservation project in the Bukit Piton Forest Reserve, Sabah, there has been a rise in the number of orangutan nests thanks to SDP’s restoration project undertaken in collaboration with the Sabah Forestry Department.



▲ The nursery at one of SDP’s tree planting project sites that provide seedlings for forest trees

▼ A riparian zone in one of SDP’s estates in Perak

The project, which began in 2008 and covers a total area of 11,612ha, was part of the Ulu Segama-Malua sustainable forest management project initiated by the Sabah government. An important area in orangutan conservation efforts, the Ulu Segama Forest is home to the largest orangutan population in Sabah (about 3,500 to 4,000 individuals).

Since 2011, SDP, Yayasan Sime Darby, Management and Ecology of Malaysian Elephants, and the University of Nottingham Malaysia have also jointly conducted human-elephant conflict research and built scholarly capacity and public awareness to mitigate the social, economic and conservation impacts of human-elephant conflicts in Malaysia, says Rashyid.

“In July 2020, we published our SOP (standard operating procedure) for human-wildlife conflict mitigation to guide the management of human-wildlife conflicts at SDP-owned and adjacent oil palm plantations and by other third parties, including researchers, academics and NGOs.

“Recently, SDP and the Malaysian Nature Society signed a mutual intention to collaborate in a one-year project to study the otters along the outlining coastal mangrove belt known as the North Central Selangor Coast. The idea is to promote the conservation of wild otters along the coastline of Selangor and to engage the plantation management and workers on human-otter conflict,” he adds.

‘WE CANNOT WORK ALONE’

Over the years, there have been challenges in the company’s journey into forest and biodiversity conservation. “The vast areas that SDP has identified for our conservation initiatives can

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▲ The wildlife sanctuary in SDP's Carey Island oil palm plantation

◀ An increase in bird species, including the purple heron, has been observed at SDP's estates

be very difficult to access and this has posed challenges in our initial assessment of the areas to determine the species that are suitable to be planted," says Rashid.

One of the lessons learnt over the years is that successful reforestation and biodiversity initiatives require huge monetary investment and partnerships with other like-minded organisations or companies.

"It can be difficult to get buy-in from stakeholders to plant these trees as they are costly and do not generate income. It is also important for us to continue monitoring and mitigating the risks to our conservation projects such as the weather (especially for new trees), human-wildlife conflicts, illegal hunting, forest fires and soil erosion. Conservation areas are quite unique and cover a vast spectrum, and therefore we cannot work alone," notes Rashid.

To date, SDP has collaborated with the Forest Research Institute Malaysia, the Malaysian Palm Oil Green Conservation Foundation for High Conservation Value and Biodiversity Training

for Smallholders, and the Sabah Environmental Protection Department, to name a few.

"One of the biodiversity projects that we have had the privilege of being associated with over the years is the Stability of Altered Forest Ecosystems (SAFE) project by the South East Asia Rainforest Research Programme.

"SAFE, considered the largest ecological experiment in the world, was funded by YSD. It encompasses just over 8,000ha of forest that has been converted into oil palm plantations. Through SAFE, scientists and researchers worked together with the palm oil industry to understand the biodiversity criteria of forests and that it is possible to create oil palm plantations while minimising ecological damage," he says.

Rashid also welcomes new collaborations — those with degraded land or forest are encouraged to approach SDP should they wish to work together in rehabilitating and restoring those areas.

On the view that some of the forest and biodiversity conservation activities may be construed as greenwashing, Rashid points out that the scale of SDP's initiatives involves not only huge monetary investment but also hard work by many parties to ensure that they are successful.

"This includes a detailed assessment of the areas that we intend to reforest to determine the species of trees that would be suitable to be planted. Most of the time, these areas are not easily accessible. The sourcing of seedlings and the preparation of the land will need to be done before the actual planting of the seedlings, which would also require efforts from many volunteers depending on the size of the areas. Once planted, we need to ensure that the trees survive, and

this also requires continuous monitoring and maintenance of the areas.

"All of these go beyond what is required by our obligations under sustainable palm oil certification schemes. But they are important because they are directly linked to our target of reducing carbon emissions. At the end of the day, it is better to take positive

action against climate change rather than worry about being labelled as greenwashing. The result of our commitment and all the efforts that we have put in place will speak for themselves." 🌱

By Sreerema Banoo



"An important part of our net zero target is the initiative to reduce 50% of our carbon emissions by 2030 via the implementation of renewable solutions and to implement nature-based solutions to increase carbon sequestration such as large-scale tree-planting."

RASHID