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Perlis 'teak orchard' beckons tourists with new attractions

Erda Khursyiah Basr

PADANG BESAR: Perlis, the smallest state in Malaysia, is often overlooked given its location on the Malaysia-Thai border.

Also known as Perlis Indera Kayangan, the state has numerous hidden gems and diverse attractions waiting to be explored. From breathtaking natural landscapes to historical sites and cultural treasures, Perlis offers a truly enriching travel experience.

Among the latest attractions is the Mata Ayer FRIM Research Station (SPF), referred to as the state's 'teak orchard' among the local community or better known as Mata Ayer SPF, beckoning tourists with attractive ecotourism facilities.

Established in 1974 at the Mata Ayer Forest Reserve, the station was originally created under the *Pinus caribaea* (Caribbean pine) Seed Improvement Programme in the forest.

Back in 1953, the area was an experimental site for the cultivation of *tectona grandis* (teak) species by the Perlis Forestry Department.

Teak found in compartment 17 of Lembah Chuchoh is the first to be planted and the oldest in Peninsular Malaysia. It is now 70 years old.

Perlis' best teak

The reserve covers an area of 455 hectares, and of the total, 300 hectares are cultivated with teak species from Thailand, Indonesia, India, Papua New Guinea, Trinidad and Sabah while another 50 hectares are under FRIM's jurisdiction.

What makes the teak tree cultivated at this forest reserve unique is the fact that it is a product of mixed species from the respective locations.

According to Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) director-general Dr Ismail Parlan, through research undertaken for teak improvement, a total of 71 selected from the mixed breed were identified and gathered at the SPF as genetic resource collection.

"For its uniqueness, FRIM was inducted in the Malaysia Book of Records for achieving 'the

Largest Collection of Teak Clone' on June 14, 2012.

"Among other FRIM's milestones through research findings at SPF are the Gold Award and Henry Goh Award for Best Invention in Environmental Innovation at the International Invention, Innovation & Technology Exhibition (ITEX) 2022 titled 'Jati Perlis: High Quality Clones for Forest Plantation Programme and Its High Value Product' as well as for registration of Invention Disclosure (ID) of seven teak clones of superior features.

"Last year, FRIM also received a visit from a company from Brazil which expressed interest in collaborating (with us) in teak clone cultivation," he said, noting that talks were still ongoing, added Ismail at the official opening of the Mata Ayer FRIM Research Station Tourism

Facility here recently.

Four new attractions unveiled

Among the facilities at the Mata Ayer tourism facility are canopy walkway (titian silara), log cabin accommodation, camping sites and seminar hall. The site receives an average 2,500 visitors annually generating a yearly income of about RM25,000.

At the launch, another three new facilities namely Denai Chenderai, Jati Campervan site, Kesinai Chalet and also Bengkel Larik were unveiled and officiated by Perlis Menteri Besar, Mohd Shukri Ramlil.

In his speech, Mohd Shukri said FRIM's reputation as a distinguished forestry-related referral research centre is known locally and abroad and it is hoped that the agency, together with Perlis Forestry Department and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture would play an active role in promoting and enhancing recreational and leisure spots that are based on ecotourism.

He also said that such efforts would go a long way in instilling greater public understanding and knowledge on the forest and the natural environment in addition to boosting the state tourism industry.

On the newly opened 500-metre Chenderai trail, Ismail said it was named as such due to the abundance of cenderai species in the area which can grow up to as high as 20 metres.

Visitors can walk-in to the site and they have to register at the canopy walkway ticket counter.

"For the Jati Campervan site, it is open to camping enthusiasts who wish to spend the night in the tranquil plantation forest. The site, which can accommodate six motorhome/campervan units, is equipped with bathroom facilities, electricity and other necessities.

"For a more comfortable outing, visitors can opt for two Kesinai Chalets for only RM150 per night, which provide one family bed and one single bed in each room.

"All ecotourism facilities at this station are based on natural environment concept, incorporating educational elements as well as creating awareness towards the importance of preservation and conservation for the environment among visitors," he said, adding that the SPF, which is located at the main travel route, is a transit for visitors before proceeding with their journey to the neighbouring country.

Ismail also expressed hope that more funds would be channelled for ecotourism activities to FRIM, particularly the Mata Ayer SPF to help boost tourist arrivals, hence fuelling the state's economy and the tourism sector.

"In addition, the Mata Ayer SPF is on Perlis tourism map in conjunction with Visit Perlis Year 2024-2025," he said.

Bengkel Larik

On Bengkel Larik, Ismail said it serves as a community training centre to produce high quality teak products through thinning of teak trees under the 12th Malaysia Plan (12MP).

Thinning is the term foresters apply to removal of some trees from a stand to give others more room (and resources) to grow.

"Various types of small-diameter wood processing machines are provided at the workshop and the community involved in this project are trained by FRIM scientists themselves. This training centre has the capacity to help the local community generate income through the sale of teak-based handicraft in addition to creating employment opportunities.

"FRIM, with the cooperation of the Perlis Forestry Department and the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraftangan Malaysia) is also seeking Geographical Indication (GI) recognition for the local teak products.

Geographical Indication is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin.

"This would elevate Perlis teak handicraft to the higher level including on the international stage," he said adding that, the workshop is also open to study visits for students, learning institutions and the relevant departments and agencies through bookings.

Souvenir items

Meanwhile, commenting on the milling machine workshop, FRIM's Innovation & Commercialisation Division Director, Mahmudin Saleh said among teak products generated from the workshop included souvenirs and home decorative items.

While waste or teak wood waste had no commercial value in the past, these waste materials

- even the smallest size - are now fully utilised under the new initiative.

He said FRIM took the initiative to utilise the entire raw materials from teak trees and adding value to the items by producing cokmar (ceremonial mace), tongkat (walking stick), rehal (book rest used for placing the Quran during recitation) and small bowls.

"Actually, we can produce a variety of products. We are working together with the Perlis Forestry Department, Kraftangan Malaysia and also the community here. Before this, we had been promoting this training programme as well as the various ways for selling the finished products.

"We understand that the people here are also carving products from wood waste known as forest products and they are actively promoting their craft through Kraftangan Malaysia. We are inviting them to participate in this programme by attending classes, seminars, training workshops as well as visits to other FRIM branches," he said, adding that at present, there

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are 12 artisans at the workshop and those who are interested in acquiring teak products can come to the SPF or place their orders online.

According to Mahmudin, in addition to having discussions with the Intellectual Property Corporation of Malaysia (MyIPO) on intellectual property (IP) protection especially on Geographical Indication aspects, branding as an issue was also raised to ensure teak products at the Mata Ayer SPF are assured of their quality and originality.

He said efforts are currently undertaken to draw up a master plan for teak products through collaboration with MyIPO, Perlis Forestry Department, Perlis Economic Planning Division and Kraftangan Malaysia, Perlis branch as well as to promote branding for Royal Perlis Jati Craft, which is poised to position Perlis teak products in the global marketplace.

For Perlis Tourism Exco Wan Badariah Wan Saad, close cooperation between the federal government the state is crucial to help boost the state's tourism sector and tourism arrivals in particular.

"In Perlis, we still maintain a natural kampung atmosphere and a sustainable environment. For example, at Mata Ayer SPF, visitors can enjoy ecotourism experience when they are in the teak forest.

"At the same time, other modern facilities such as the Jati campervan site are other attractions to visitors who can spend the night here and enjoy a different yet unique ambience," said Wan Badariah, who is also Mata Ayer assemblywoman.

Besides teak cultivation, the Mata Ayer SPF also conducts research, among others, a project on 'Collection of Endangered and Vulnerable Species for Germplasm Strength' with a targeted collection of 100 species, based on status classification of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

An inventory of valuable assets comprising plots of a clone bank or genetic resource collection has been set up at the station.

Besides that, plots of research of other species are also created to conduct studies on seed improvement of forest plantation species such as teak clone test plots, progeny plots of meranti temak nipis and meranti sarang punai as well as 'common garden' plots.

Plans are in the pipeline to create sites for glamping, fishing and picnic activities at the Mata

Ayer SPF in the future.

FRIM also hopes to package these ecotourism activities together with tour packages to Gua Kelam and Wang Kelian View Point under the auspices of Perlis Forestry Department to boost tourist arrivals to the state.

All these would bode well for efforts to position Perlis as among the country's top ecotourism destinations. — Bernama

For the Jati Campervan site, it is open to camping enthusiasts who wish to spend the night in the tranquil plantation forest. The site, which can accommodate six motorhome/campervan units, is equipped with bathroom facilities, electricity and other necessities.

Dr Ismail Parian



Universiti Malaysia Perlis students take part in an activity at the Mata Ayer SPF which beckons tourists with attractive ecotourism facilities. — Bernama photos

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Mata Ayer SPF is described by Perlis folks as the state's `teak orchard`.



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