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40 years of success and the future of Danum Valley

Emin Madi

THE late 1980's was the beginning of the important phase of heightening research and conservation activities at Danum Valley in Lahad Datu, Sabah.

It was also the era where the unlogged area and portion of the Yayasan Sabah Concession area were still very large.

Consequently, the Danum Valley Conservation Area (DVCA) became a model for one of the best-managed protected areas in Malaysia, leading to global recognition as a renowned tropical rainforest research centre, alongside La Selva in Costa Rica.

Today, the Danum Valley Field Centre (DVFC) is an amazing place to visit. Visitors could experience a dream-like phenomenon, such as living in co-existence with mystical nature while having real close encounters with wildlife species.

At DVFC, many wildlife species such as orang utans, gibbons and hornbills could be seen roaming freely around the vicinity, while a couple of sambar deer regularly hang around inside the field centre compound.

The journey to achieve what Danum Valley has become today has not been easy, especially considering that many of Danum Valley's potentials are yet to be discovered.

This writer was embedded with more than 50 participants in a three-day workshop on the future research direction of DVCA at Danum Valley Field Centre at Lahad Datu, recently.

The workshop was organised by Yayasan Sabah through its Conservation, Environmental and Management Department (CEMD).

Interestingly, the majority of the participants are well-acquainted with the

history of DVCA. One of them, in particular, is Prof. Datuk Ghazally Ismail, who flew all the way from New Zealand, where he now resides, to attend the workshop.

Dr Ghazally is one of the early chairperson of Danum Valley Management Committee (DVMC), representing University Kebangsaan Malaysia Sabah Campus.

The DVMC, formed in 1982, plays a role as a "one-stop-centre" for the research application process and has been crucial in facilitating the international collaborative research programme.

The establishment of DVMC also led to the initiation of the Danum Valley Research and Training Programme, which was agreed upon through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 1984.

The signatories were Yayasan Sabah, Sabah Forestry Department and Universiti Kebangsaan Sabah Campus. At the same time, a supplementary MoU was signed between these agencies and the Royal Society, UK.

Other members of the management committee include Sabah Wildlife Department, Ministry of Tourism Culture and Environment, Sabah Parks, World Wildlife Fund-Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, University Malaysia Sabah, and Forest Research Institute Malaysia.

The workshop recommendations

The three-day workshop pooled more than 20 recommendations covering areas such as the assessment and repository of rainforest diversity, rainforest ecology, regeneration, conservation and reforestation.

Loss of biodiversity and climate change, economics and policies in rain forest management issues of sustainable eco-tourism were also discussed.



Living in co-existence with wildlife species: Wild sambar deer regularly roam around Danum Valley Field Centre.



The serene tranquility around the Danum Valley Field Centre.



Participants of the three-day workshop on the future research direction of Danum Valley Conservation Area at DVFC, recently.

In his opening remark as a workshop facilitator, Dr Ghazally emphasised the importance of leveraging the strength of the research programs and activities at Danum Valley as an important underpinning factor that drives the sustainable eco-tourism activity at Danum Valley.

"Don't disturb or destroy this co-existence (ecotourism and research), lest we end up just like any other usual destination," he emphasised.

He also delved with some emergent challenges related to biodiversity and carbon sequestration, whole genome sequencing and in-situ conservation, taking lessons from the extinction of Sumatran rhinoceros in Sabah.

"I find it very important to provide environmental educational to graduate, under-graduate, school children, public at large, industry leaders and politicians," he said.

Recommendations from the workshop focused on the future challenges for the management of DVCA, more so in term of sustainable eco-tourism.

There was strong suggestion from among the participants on the need for setting up a conservation fund for

Danum as well as making DVCA more visible to public, locally and internationally through media exposure.

They also suggested providing relevant funds by introducing grant to encourage more researchers to conduct research (novelty research) at DVCA.

Participants also recommended increasing enforcement and monitoring of poaching activities, in term of monitoring technology and community as well as to re-survey the wildlife population, distribution, migration pattern and recovery of habitat.

On the issue of loss of biodiversity, more studies should be focused on the species that are threatened by poaching and find ways to counter market value of threatened species for the indirect impact of conservation.

To establish club for non-scientists to participate in research through education and awareness and to encourage data sharing with the public.

To encourage studies on known gaps of biodiversity, namely, insects, floral taxa, soil and aquatic organism, canopy and atmospheric communities.

It was also recommended for the establishment of additional facilities, which has to be outside the pristine undisturbed DVCA core area and to make study on the potential of virtual tourism.

Empowerment of research activities in DVCA should also be done through the introduction of new techniques and approaches in assessing the subject of studies, such as bioacoustic, molecular study, advance remote sensing, environmental DNA and eDNA.

Distinguished participants who attended the workshop include Prof. Emeritus Dato' Dr Mazlin bin Mokhtar, from Sustainable & Development Solution Network Asia (SDSN) Headquarters, KL, Prof. Dr. Justin Sentian from University Malaysia Sabah (UMS).

Prof Dr Chin-Huat Wong, also from SDSN, Prof Dr Hj Abdul Hamid Ahmad (UMS), Dr Wong Siew Te, Borneo Sun Bear Conservation, Dr Alexius Korom (UIM Sabah), Dr Rahimatsah Amat CEO Sabah Environmental Trust (SET) and Datuk Dr Glen Reynolds (South East Asia Rainforest Research Partnership (SEARRP)).