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From devastated forest to world-class 'living lab'

Emin Madi

KOTA KINABALU: Deep in the heart of Tawau in Sabah, an extraordinary transformation is taking place.

What began as a bold experiment in forest restoration has blossomed into one of the world's most remarkable environmental success stories.

With the completion of the Innoprise-IKEA Tropical Forest Rehabilitation Project (INIKEA) in Luasong in the district of Tawau, the initiators of the over 20-year-long project are now setting their sights on an ambitious goal – transforming the restored rainforest into the world's first 'Living Rainforest Restoration Lab' that will serve as a centre of excellence for knowledge on tropical rainforest restoration.

INIKEA got off the ground in June 1998 following a memorandum of understanding between Yayasan Sabah Group's investment arm Innoprise Corporation Sdn Bhd (ICSB) and Swedish furniture retail company IKEA's Sow-a-Seed Foundation.

The groundbreaking project encompassed the rehabilitation of 14,009 hectares of rainforest in Tawau that were devastated by wildfires in 1983, making it one of the most significant forest restoration efforts globally.

One of Malaysia's largest and longest-running forest rehabilitation initiatives, INIKEA involved the replanting of approximately five million seedlings representing around 92 indigenous tree species.

INIKEA also saw the involvement of the Swedish

University of Agriculture Sciences (SLU) which provided research and technical support for the project, while its advisory steering committee comprised

representatives from Yayasan Sabah Group, IKEA, WWF-Malaysia, SLU, Sabah Wildlife Department, Universiti Malaysia Sabah and Forest Research Institute Malaysia.

Last month, Yayasan Sabah Group and IKEA's Sow-a-Seed Foundation renewed their partnership for another 10 to 20 years. Yayasan Sabah director Datuk Seri Gulamhaidar Khan Bahadar@Yusof Khan was quoted by the media as saying that they will introduce the living rainforest restoration lab initiative as part of their continued collaboration.

"The new endeavour will advance research, education and best practices in rainforest restoration," he said.

Experts, meanwhile, have described INIKEA's results as "nothing short of a miracle". While its degraded rainforest has been successfully rehabilitated, what makes this project truly special is the diversity of life that's returning to the forest.

Said Asa Skogtrom Feldt, 56, chairman of Sow-A-Seed Foundation: "The project was not only important but also unique both in Malaysia and internationally. It showcases that (forest) restoration is possible with long-term commitment. It also serves as a role model for preserving nature."

She is also excited that the INIKEA site in Luasong, Tawau, is fully restored and now classified as a Class 1 protected forest – the highest conservation status in Malaysia.

"It's truly fantastic. Wildlife is returning to the area. I have visited Luasong three times and last year (2024) I saw about two dozen wild Borneo pygmy elephants there. So much wildlife has now returned to the area," she told Bernama.

SLU researcher Ulrik Ilstedt, 52, who has been involved with the INIKEA project for over 10

years, is also delighted over the return of wildlife to Luasong.

"The INIKEA project was truly unique and it is heartening to see the resurgence of numerous wildlife species," he said.

Feldt said they have been presenting INIKEA on the world stage, including at COP (Conference of the Parties, which is the United Nations climate change conference) to raise global awareness and allow other countries to study Malaysia's achievements.

"There is significant international interest in learning about this project," she said.

"I have learned so much from this project – for instance, testing how to work with local tree species, collecting seeds and establishing nurseries.

"Ninety-two species have been planted in the INIKEA project (site), which is unique globally for its diversity. It also underscores the importance of a long-term commitment to restoration work as forests grow slowly and require persistent effort."

Feldt said the next phase of the INIKEA project will see more research being carried out, involving local and international researchers from SLU and other Nordic universities.

Regarding plans to transform the INIKEA site into a 'Living Rainforest Restoration Lab', she said it will showcase the

rehabilitated forest itself as well as the various testing plots, different restoration techniques and diverse mix of tree species.

SLU's Ilstedt said the success of INIKEA – including the infrastructure in the area – has paved the way for research activities by both local and international researchers.

"The most interesting lesson I learned from INIKEA is the need for long-term monitoring of a forest to observe its development and understand how it

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contributes to the ecosystem," he said.

Ilstedt said his research at INIKEA covered, among others, the establishment of research plots and experimentation with various methodologies.

"This research was aimed at enhancing forest restoration and its diversity and structure, as well as to showcase the

added. — Bernama

environmental and social benefits of restoring vast areas of degraded forests," he said.

He added for INIKEA to gain greater international visibility, it is necessary to foster networking to ensure that the knowledge gained from the forest restoration project is shared with all stakeholders.

"There is also a significant opportunity to develop the INIKEA project as a research centre as well as a destination where tourists can learn about nature, wildlife and restoration," he added.

Dr Mikhail Tarasov, 50, head of forestry at Inter IKEA Group, said the success of the INIKEA project is a great example of how nature can be restored.

"It (INIKEA's success) also demonstrates what is required in terms of commitment, funding, expertise and time. All the ingredients for rehabilitating a forest require consistency. It is a fascinating and unique experience to observe how new species develop and integrate into the forest over the long term," he said.

He added this knowledge can be translated and communicated to the scientific community in order to reach donors who fund such restoration efforts.

Another SLU researcher Associate Prof Petter Axelsson, 51, who was also involved in INIKEA, said forest restoration is high on the global agenda.

"When I visited Luasong 15 years ago, I recognised the potential of native trees for reforestation. In a system with thousands of species, there are a lot of options but also challenges that we need to overcome" he

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Inikea has seen the replanting of approximately five million seedlings representing around 92 indigenous tree species.
— Photo from Facebook/INIKEA-Kalabakan Upland