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A vision for conservation

Anak Enggang

IN a few months, Malaysia will host the 22nd BirdLife International World Conference and Global Partnership Meeting. This is an honour for which several countries fought for keenly, and I am gratified that Malaysia was selected after being shortlisted to a final three choices.

Apart from placing us firmly on the world map as an international site for ecotourism and Meetings, Incentive tours, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE), the selection of Malaysia also augurs well for conservation of habitats for birds and all other wild creatures.

Many people said that it could never be done - Malaysia just wasn't ready for such a significant event, and the national partner of BirdLife International, the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) was totally inadequate to the task.

Anak Enggang, however, believed otherwise, and pushed for our country to make a bid. The only other person who shared this vision was Datuk Salleh Mohd Nor, the MNS president and former director-general of the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia.

The first non-Caucasian president of the International Forestry Organisation, Salleh has put Malaysia on the world map for forestry research, conservation and a commitment to biodiversity: very unusual kudos for a professional forester! He is also known in many parts of the world for his keen involvement in Malaysia's oldest scientific organisation, the MNS. Established in 1940, the MNS is represented in every State in Malaysia and is committed to promote the study, appreciation and conservation of Malaysia's natural heritage through its network of 12 branches and seven speciality groups.

Under the guidance of Salleh, the MNS has charted numerous "firsts" in nature conservation. In 1977, the society prepared a memorandum titled "A Blueprint for Conservation in Malaysia" for the Third Malaysia Plan. A decade later it established the Kuala Selangor Nature Park in collaboration with the Selangor State Government in a sterling example of Government-NGO co-operation that continues today.

Between 1985 and 1989, the MNS ran the biggest scientific expedition ever organised by Malaysians, to the Endau-Rompin rainforest in the south of Peninsular Malaysia. In 1990, the MNS celebrated its 50th anniversary by hosting an international conference on conservation of tropical biodiversity which was opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In 1994, the MNS conducted successful scientific expeditions to the Belum area in Perak, one of the least-known forests in Malaysia, and perhaps the world, under the patronage of the then Yang di-Pertuan Agong Sultan Azlan Shah. The expedition discovered several new species of plants and other creatures.

The society has also set up nature clubs in schools, and operates nature education centres at Kepong and Cameron Highlands. The society's education unit not only cares for the next generation, but also provides training for teachers so that they can help set up and run nature clubs in their own schools.

In all its endeavours, there is a vision for conservation that marks the MNS, and Salleh is an integral part of this forward-looking characteristic. Fully aware that the actions and decisions of this generation will decide the fate of future generation the MNS president is