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Need to intensify research into and tap Sabah's ecosystem

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THE domestic flights in Sabah must have inspired many a beautiful prose.

There is something about the view below. Like those arching mountains, each cresting above the other, a green carpet of forest and the rivers.

Everything that can be seen seems so intimate and beautiful.

This is a treasure - tropical forest, agriculture, fisheries and eco-tourism in one.

What do you do with this asset? Of course, it does not take a think-tank to discover the potential.

But the State Government's think-tank, Institute for Development Studies (IDS), has over the years, conducted studies, organised seminars and workshops on and about the tropical ecosystem.

The latest effort is a memorandum of understanding with Universiti Malaysia Sabah for a study of non-timber forest products and to strengthen research collaboration with local institutions of higher learning.

IDS chairman Datuk Masidi Manjun said the MoU symbolised the smart partnership between two organisations to undertake joint research activities towards sustainable development in the State and the country.

State Tourism Development, Science and Technology Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat said being rich in biodiversity, the State's tropical ecosystem was unique.

So unique that it merits careful conservation efforts and quality management.

To explore this issue, a two-day seminar was held in Kota Kinabalu recently.

The objectives were:

- * to promote application of research findings in tropical ecosystem conservation and community development efforts;

- * to promote the utilisation of tropical resources and innovative research in the use of local resources to produce advanced material products; and,

- * to review the impact of resources commercialisation on the tropical environment.

It also focused on how research could help optimise use of the State's tropical resources without diminishing them.

Chong said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had last year emphasised the need for the country to step up efforts to improve Malaysia's own technological and engineering capacity.

This will help reduce Malaysia's dependence on technologies imported from other countries, as the royalties paid yearly for the use of such technologies are high.

"We Malaysians have the capacity and capability to develop our own technologies," Chong said.

Chong also said that last year Dr Mahathir issued a challenge to the Malaysian scientific community to produce a Nobel Laureate by the year 2020.

"Sabah's rich tropical ecosystem presents enormous research opportunities for the potential Nobel Laureate."

He said the seminar could be developed further into a gathering of researchers and scientists that could become a reservoir for nominations for the Nobel Prize.

Sabah has traditionally depended on the forest sector to support the

State's economic growth.

In the past two decades, timber revenue contributed more than 50 per cent of the State's gross domestic product.

However, this contribution can no longer be sustained due to the diminishing supply of the State's forest resources for timber production.

In response, the Government made an important decision by adopting a system of sustainable forest management for commercial forest production in Sabah.

Under this system, Sabah's forest resources, renowned for their rich biodiversity of flora and fauna, are given protection, for instance, from destructive logging practices.

Chong said the Government recognised that non-sustainable logging activities would not only cause serious environmental degradation but also threaten the wide array of services and benefits provided by the tropical forest ecosystem.

Sabah's rich and varied ecosystem offers resources for multiple use with the potential to benefit both the State economy, the local community and mankind in general.

For instance, non-timber forest products cannot only provide food, shelter, and other materials for basic human needs and consumption but also serve as material for pharmaceutical products.

Chong said Sabah's varied and wonderful ecosystem comprising a range of habitats and landscapes also provided the foundation for the State's tourism industry.

Another aspect of the tropical ecosystem is the crops and tree commodities such as oil palm, cocoa and rubber. "While we recognise the potential use of tropical resources, it is important to ensure that the natural ecosystem is adequately protected and conserved."

He said the creation of the State Environmental Conservation Department was a clear indication of the Government's commitment to the protection and conservation of natural resources and enhancement of the environment.

All said and done, research and development efforts on the tropical ecosystem in Sabah need to be further intensified to assist the State achieve its development goals.

Sabah can emerge as a leading player in utilising and managing the tropical resources once the State acquires the capacity and capability to sustain its tropical resources for the need of the present as well as future generations.

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