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Scientists catch Antarctic cold

By Arni Shahida Razak

FIRST it was Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and his team of about 70 who made the journey to Antarctica in 2002. From there on, Universiti Sains Malaysia has been consistently sending its best scientists to explore the cold, white continent.

"If it wasn't for Tun (Dr Mahathir), we probably would not have reached Antarctica. But when he reached the cold continent, it sort of threw a challenge to the young scientists. If he could do it, why couldn't we?" USM School of Biological Sciences dean Professor Mashhor Mansor said.

Having been to Antarctica himself, he said Antarctica was like a "global living museum" waiting to be explored.

"For me, our former Prime Minister had posed an interesting challenge for us to venture to Antarctica. I mean, why not?"

"Yes, it's a difficult trip to Antarctica, but there is still so much to learn there," he said.

USM has sent eight of its scientists to Antarctica and more are waiting their turn to conduct research there.

An expedition early this year was undertaken by scientists Dr Rashidah Abdul Rahim, 30, Dr Latiffah Zakaria, 35, and Faradina Merican Mohd Sidek Merican, 23. They spent about six weeks conducting research on the genes and enzymes of Antarctic micro-organisms, micro-fungi and lichen, as well as the diversity and evolution of Antarctic periphytic algae.

The three women said the expedition had been challenging, yet stimulating and uplifting.

Dr Rashidah said: "It was purely for the love of science and the desire to explore the continent that made the trip possible for us. But we're glad we did it. I think it's an accomplishment for us."

She added that life "is cruel" at Antarctica and those who go there must first mentally prepare themselves "to overcome whatever challenges that come their way".

"I think we managed to prove to the other scientists (from around the world) that Malaysians can withstand challenges as tough as Antarctica. Our dedication, hard work and perseverance in conducting research there have earned the respect from other scientists too," she said.

Proof of this is that USM is set to be inducted into a consortium of 15 universities engaged in the teaching of Antarctic sciences.

Through its participation in the International University of Antarctica, USM will be the first Southeast Asian university to serve as a regional focal point for education on Antarctica.

It will join the ranks of institutions like Oxford University in the United Kingdom, Ohio University (United States), University of Canterbury (New Zealand) as well as universities in Australia, Japan, Germany and Norway.

Mashhor said: "It's an achievement for us, but more importantly, I'm glad that we were given the opportunity and the support to conduct research in Antarctica. I think all the work done will not only benefit us, but also to mankind. And yes, given the chance, I'd like to visit the continent again."

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