

# Dr M: Merbau is our national tree

## PM also affirms commitment to forest conservation

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**KUALA LUMPUR:** The Merbau, known for its hardwood, is now Malaysia's national tree, announced the Prime Minister.

"The Merbau tree has been chosen as our national tree. With its hardy nature, I believe that all Malaysians can take the Merbau as a symbol of national pride," he said.

Also known as the Malacca teak, the tree is indigenous to Malaysia and can grow up to 50m.

The government, said Dr Mahathir, would outline eight key actions for sustainable forest management and mainstreaming biodiversity in Malaysia's socio-economic development agenda.

The country was fully committed to retaining 50% of its forests as reserves and would not renege on its promise made during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, he said during the "Hutan Kita: Journey Through Our Rainforest" exhibition at the KL Tower here yesterday.

"We will maintain at least 50% of our land area under forest cover in accordance with our commitment

made at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

"When translated, 'Hutan Kita' means 'Our Forest', a powerful affirmation that the forest belongs to us. We could take the irresponsible contention that since it belongs to us, we can very well do what we like with it.

"On the other hand, I would like to believe that our interpretation of the tagline is positive in which, since the forest is ours, it is our responsibility to protect and conserve its longevity, sustainability and beauty," said Dr Mahathir.

The exhibition, which was organised by the Water, Land and Natural Resources Ministry, will be held until Sept 22.

Minister Dr Xavier Jayakumar said the government was looking at amending the law to increase the penalties for anyone caught trespassing in any permanent forest reserves.

"The law will be more severe on those caught loitering in the forest without permission of the agencies involved," he said.

Amendments to the National Forestry Act 1984, said Dr Jayaku-

mar, would likely be brought to Parliament in March, adding that the committees in charge within the ministry were in the midst of submitting the draft to the Attorney General's Chambers.

Dr Jayakumar said the amendment would propose increasing both the fines and the custodial sentence for trespassers.

At present, trespassers into forests can be fined RM10,000 or jailed three years or both.

As land matters were currently under the state jurisdiction, Dr Jayakumar said there was a need for stringent standard operating procedures (SOP) on degazetting forests.

"If the states don't follow the SOP, the people, who will be informed of the SOP, can take necessary action against the states," he said, adding that the ministry would not wait for the states to reply but would instead engage the public citizen watch.

He also said the Orang Asli would be continuously engaged to safeguard the forests as they were the "eyes and ears against poachers and those stealing our treasure", especially important species of wood like agarwood.