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Venue : **MALIAU BASIN, SABAH**

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Title : **OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE MALIAU BASIN STUDIES CENTRE AND
LAUNCHING OF THE SAFE PROJECT**

1. It gives me great pleasure to participate in this historic occasion and to officially open the Maliau Basin Studies Centre and launch the Stability of Altered Forest Ecosystems Project - called the SAFE Project. We have the Sime Darby Foundation and The Royal Society's South-East Asia Rainforest Research Programme (SEARRP) to thank for both of them.

2. I say historic because Maliau Basin, which is Sabah's own Lost World, will become the centre of the world's largest ecological experiment. It will provide the basis for a 10-year study into the impact of forest modifications - that is the impact of logging, deforestation and forest fragmentation on the functioning of tropical rainforests.

3. This long-term project, which is funded by the Sime Darby Foundation, involves renowned scientists from the Royal Society of the United Kingdom, which established SEARRP in 1985. It also involves researchers from the UK's Imperial College and is supported by Sabah Foundation, which owns forest and plantation concessions in the Basin.

Ladies and gentlemen,

4. The Maliau Basin will become an integral part of this ecological experiment. It contains rare flora and fauna, including at least six types of pitcher plants, more than 80 species of orchids, the rare *Rafflesia tengku-adlinii*, and some of the world's most rare and endangered wildlife species. These include the Sumatran Rhinoceros, Banteng, Orang Utan and Proboscis monkey.

5. Only 25 percent of Maliau Basin, which covers an area of over 58,000 hectares, has been explored to date. From major expeditions carried out in 1986, 1996, 2001 and 2005, we learned it likely has the greatest number of waterfalls anywhere in Malaysia, about 40 of them in all. These include the famous seven-tiered Maliau Falls and Sabah's only ox-bow lake, called Lake Linumunsut.

6. This will provide a perfect setting for this long-term research project. Malaysia is one of 12 mega-biodiversity countries in the world. Such richness is supported by diverse habitats, especially the tropical rainforest on the Island of Borneo. Protecting pristine areas and bio-diversity conservation are critical global issues. The diversity and richness of this Land Below the Wind – as Sabah is known - is overwhelming.

7. With this appreciation of the uniqueness, diversity and values of our tropical rainforests, we must establish systems to protect these areas and their resources. This should be done both in-situ (in the original, natural place) and ex-situ (off-site, away from the natural habitat) in line with the Convention of Biological Diversity. Malaysia has taken the first step

by becoming one of its signatory countries. The convention defines policies, strategies and obligations to improve conservation efforts.

8. By conserving and managing in these ways, we are maintaining the ecological processes and life support systems, preserving genetic diversity, and ensuring sustainable utilisation of species and ecosystems. This also maintains the wilderness for its scenic, cultural, educational, research, recreational and tourism benefits.

9. Conservation requires knowledge of the ecosystem. By strengthening our research into biodiversity and ecosystems and influencing factors, we will understand how to effectively protect them.

10. Conservation requires funding, however. The private sector, both local and overseas, can play a significant role in sustaining and extending our conservation efforts. This will be crucial in making the Maliau Basin Studies Centre a premier facility for tropical rainforest research and scientific discovery in the region.

11. In addition, the centre will contribute towards developing scientific information and a database for our growing biotechnology industry. By strengthening the capability of our scientists, they can be on par with the global scientific community.

12. One of the concerns is the availability of local scientists to fully utilise the facilities. Perhaps MOSTI and other related agencies can take up the challenge and provide a mechanism to assist local scientists. Also, Malaysian institutions of higher learning and researchers from the Academy Sciences of Malaysia, the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia and the Forest Research Centre Sepilok could benefit from working here. We would like to involve them in conducting research in Sabah and, in particular, in the Maliau Basin Conservation Area.

13. The SAFE Project, meanwhile, will also benefit Malaysia in other ways as the property rights to project findings, research and scientific papers, will be jointly owned by the parties involved. This includes Sime Darby Foundation and involved scientists.

14. The project aligns with the Government's commitment to conservation and helps to address other important issues the world is facing, namely climate change as a result of deforestation.

15. I understand that at least three scientists or scholars and four of the eight PhD students involved in the research project will be Malaysians. In addition, most of the field research assistants will be Malaysians.

16. This research will make a major contribution to the understanding of how biodiversity can be protected and maintained on plantations. It will also assess how to balance the economic benefits from the oil palm industry with the need for environmental conservation and sustainable development.

17. To date, no definitive study exists on the quantifiable impact of deforestation on wildlife, water quality, nutrient cycling and soil stability. At best, what we have are educated guesses which aren't sufficient to make important decisions that affect our environment and lives.

18. To address these questions properly, we need a large-scale, long-term ecological experiment like the SAFE Project. Over the next ten years, it will provide concrete answers to these questions and can offer modifications to the way we operate oil palm plantations.

19. In the meantime, the Malaysian Government and the Malaysian palm oil industry already are taking concerted actions to protect the environment and wildlife in Malaysia.

20. Through the Malaysian Palm Oil Council, we established the Malaysian Palm Oil Wildlife Conservation Fund in 2006. It has initial funding of RM20 million, of which RM10 million was a grant from the Malaysian Government. The balance came from the palm oil industry.

21. One of the objectives of this initiative is to study wildlife and biodiversity and ensure environmental conservation, while considering the overall impact of the palm oil industry on them. To date, here are examples of projects already funded by this initiative:

- A Jungle Patrol to protect wildlife in forest reserves bordering oil palm plantations, in collaboration with the Sabah Forestry Department;
- A biodiversity conservation study on ox-bow lakes on oil palm plantations, carried out by University Malaysia Sabah;
- An Orang Utan infant care unit in Bukit Merah Lake Resort;
- A survey of the Orang Utan population in Sabah, carried out by Borneo Conservation Trust, Sabah Wildlife Department and an NGO called HUTAN;
- A study of elephant, human and wildlife conflicts in forest reserves bordering oil palm plantations by the Department of Wildlife Malaysia; and
- Production of educational materials on wildlife conservation through collaborations with Tabin Wildlife Sanctuary and Sabah Forestry Department.

22. The Malaysian Government fully supports this noble initiative by Sime Darby Foundation, SEARRP and the Sabah Foundation. It aligns well with the objectives of the National Policy on the Environment, which was designed to promote environmentally sound and sustainable development.

23. On behalf of the Malaysian Government, I would like to thank Sime Darby Foundation, SEARRP and Sabah Foundation for their efforts in finding answers to these important questions and improving our understanding of ways to protect our forests and the environment.

24. I hope other private sector companies will follow the footsteps of Sime Darby Foundation and Sabah Foundation. The Government fully supports these initiatives, as we believe future generations have a right to enjoy these natural blessings of the Almighty.

25. With that, I now officially open the Maliau Basin Research Studies Centre and launch the SAFE Project of Sime Darby and SEARRP.

Thank you.