

An unusual evening

A FEW days ago, I was at Sepilok in Sandakan to see the orang utan, often referred to by the anti-palm oil lobbies, saying plantations are not concerned about their dwindling numbers. Although the visit to the centre was not connected to plantations, it became linked when I attended a charity dinner that evening that had me seated next to a Puan Sri.

I had gone to the Sandakan area to visit an estate, and it was good to see the palms growing well, with long spreading fronds. There was a slight breeze, not a cloud in the sky, and the bird calls were the ones special to these parts.

As I walked with the estate team on the terraces, seeing the bunches full on the trees, I knew the peak crop was near, likely to be with us in the next two months. This was the scene I had seen and savoured in my life, although over the years the challenges had been different.

When the estate visit was over, it was time for a reunion with some planters, including Gengadharan Pillai, who had come from the peninsula as a teacher in 1969. He married a Sabahan, joined a plantation company – The River Estates Sdn Bhd – and retired with a piece of land to occupy him by raising goats under the palms.

At its peak he had over 400 goats, with sales of over 100 head a year. Sabah has the advantage of not having the foot-and-mouth disease. It just goes to show that Sabah has potential for livestock farming under oil palm, even for smallholders.

Another planter friend,

Sadasivan, has a new business after retirement. He is engaged in promoting clonal banana plantlets supplied by United Plantations in Perak. Smallholders are starting to plant them. The bunches are bigger than in the local variety and the price is higher in the market.

So, Sabah is likely to lead the way in finding new crops. However, the oil palm will still be earning the main income for the state for some time. It has replaced logging, and I remember the time when timber lorries used to rule the road.

Help from ex-beauty queen

The visit to Sepilok was inspired by the charity body, GIVE Malaysia. The organisation's president is Betty Anne Brohier, a former beauty queen of Malaysia Asia-Pacific, who is dedicated to giving something back to society. She brought a team of over 40 people from Kuala Lumpur, working to raise funds for people in need and for protection of animals.

That included a donation to the Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre. When we arrived, Sylvia Alsisos, who was in charge, explained that the orang utan live in the trees at the 4,040ha centre but at feeding time, some would come down to eat fruits, including

banana and water melon, on the wooden platforms. The young would swing on the ropes, before taking to the branches again with their mothers and melt into the treetops. The sick or injured were treated, and orphans were trained to live in the wild again. The centre also treats elephants and sun bears.

To me, the centre was not only an attraction to see the animals, it was also an experience to see the tall jungle trees while walking on wooden walkways, quiet all around, except for the shrill ringing of the cicadas. The place has expanded since I last saw it many years ago. GIVE is contributing to the centre to help with its upkeep.

Another place GIVE was donating to was the Duchess of Kent Hospital. It stands prominently overlooking the road on the way into town. We went to see the paediatric ward where children were treated for malnutrition and such diseases as malaria and thalassemia.

Earlier, Brohier and some of her team members had reached the remote area of Tongod and saw more help was needed. Dr Francis Paul, the head of the hospital, had explained that donations help to pay the bus fares of the sick, and buy hearing aid or eye-glasses that some patients would need.

A fund-raising dinner was held with the sponsors at the Sheraton Four Points Hotel, with its general manager, Peter Padman, helping with the preparation and training a singing



The orang utan can be seen at the Sepilok rehabilitation centre

group among his staff, with him at the piano.

The sponsors included Ireka Corporation Bhd, represented by Datuk Lai Voon Hon, and Sawit Kinabalu Sdn Bhd, a plantation company with nearly 70,000ha of oil palm. The managing director is Datuk Othman Walat, and he was seated at the main table at the end of the catwalk where the latest designs were modelled by former beauty queens, including Michelle Lee, Karmen Khor and Su Yen. The designers included Leslie Variyan, Bon Zainal and Bill Keith.

Needless to say, it was a new experience for me, a planter as a guest at a fashion show, and I realised later why I was placed there. It was because I could meet the patron of the charity, Puan Sri To' Puan Shariffa Sabrina Syed Akil.

I had not met her, but I did a bit of homework before I came in. I was told that apart from working hard for charity, she was totally opposed to oil palm. She would speak her mind, which could

not be changed, regardless of the risks. You could see her on YouTube. In between the great singing of Rozz, Poova and Sammy Ariff (a showman who can deliver all the old songs with panache), I managed to mention oil palm to the Puan Sri.

"Let me make my position clear," she said, "I don't agree with planting of oil palm. It destroys the forests, the plantations bring in chemicals that pollute the rivers and bring sickness to the children, and harm the orang utan. GIVE will donate where we feel there is a need."

I explained it was the loggers who destroyed, we planters followed to re-green the forests by planting trees.

"But not oil palm. It is better to plant coconuts. They are natural to our environment, and they are not so destructive," she replied.

I realised there was a lot of work trying to correct her impression about oil palm. The industry has to help with that, and Sawit Kinabalu was doing its part quietly, through its CSR work.

Noryn Aziz came on stage and did a strong rendition with Poova on their favourite songs. The young crowd clamoured for more. It was certainly a good night for the charity, fashion and jewellery design, and the auctions that followed.

GIVE's team had a successful evening, but as I left for my room, I realised the oil palm industry has much to do: there are more people to reach, so they too can know the right story. We are taking steps to safeguard our environment, but we should also tell more people what they are. **FOCUSM**

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