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Highland museum for the environment

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BARIO: Forest Department Sarawak (FDS) supported by International Tropical Timber Organisation (ITTO) launched the Environment Education Programme (EEP) and the Bario Museum Project under the Pulong Tau National Park Project (PTNP) recently.

The programme was the first of its kind to be implemented in Bario aimed at promoting nature awareness and education among the young generation.

The FDS/ITTO Project in PTNP has been actively supporting the development of two main schools in the Kelabit Highlands — SMK Bario and SK Bario.

The national park is not only an important and unique highland biodiversity conservation area but also a vital link to the socio-economic well-being of the local communities along the periphery of the park.

Highland communities living close to the National Park are the Kelabits in the villages around Bario and Long Lellang, the Lun Bawang in Ba Kelalan, and the Penans, including a small semi-nomadic group, in a number of small scattered villages outside the western boundary of the park.

Due to the remote location and difficulty of access, the communities continue to depend on the nearby forest for timber (for construction), firewood, forest produce, food and medicine.

In collaboration with the two schools, the project has helped to set up a resource centre known as the Bario Village Museum.

The museum aims to stimulate informal learning experience among school children, particularly in nature, and at the same time, serve as an information hub for both foreign and local visitors alike.

The idea was first mooted by SMK Bario principal Morris Chong.

The display centre has two parts — Nature Resource Section which introduces visitors to the FDS/ITTO project in PTNP and the different types of forests in the world; and Sarawak and factors that are responsible for diversity.

The display also includes the importance of forests to men, examples of forest use, impact of mismanagement of forests, and how to help conserve the forest.

Also for viewing are historical photographs of the local communities, cultural sites, and information of the schools, their activities and achievements.

The museum was opened to public after it was jointly launched by the project manager Dr Paul Chai, Pemancha Henry Jala, and representatives from ITTO's donor countries from Japan Chiho Horiuchi and Dr Jurgen Blaser from Switzerland to coincide with the ITTO Project Steering Committee's visit to Bario on September 11 .

Apart from helping the school with the resource centre, the project also organised an environmental education programme on July 14 and 15 for 75 students and teachers in SMK and SK Bario through talks and hands-on activities such as jungle trekking.

This is the first EEP conducted by the project organiser, focusing on different types of forest in Sarawak and their role as a life support system as well as in socio-economic development.

Through outdoor approach, participants were able to relate and experience lessons taught in class such as planting and plant-animal interactions, forest gaps and the importance of forest to humans both as a protective function and as a medicinal, timber and non-timber produce.

The EEP will be extended in Phase II to the local communities along the periphery of the park, and schools in Bario, Ba Kelalan, Long Lellang and Pa' Dalih.

A module has been prepared to complement the syllabus of science subjects in the school curriculum.

Therefore, it is helping students to connect what they have learnt in the classroom and relate them with real examples on the ground.

In that way, students will understand the concept and be able to translate and relate the processes, and appreciate the nature surrounding them.

During the programme, the participants were presented with a talk on "Introduction of Tropical Rain Forest" followed by a few environmental games and a series of interactive discussions.

Among the environmental games were water catchment games, survival of the fittest and habitat loss games.

The students also had the experience to trek along the forest trail to observe and learn nature's processes such as photosynthesis, plant-to-plant interaction, the definition of secondary forest, get to know some examples of non-timber forest produce use by the local community, plant- animal interaction, wildlife, forest strata, forest gaps and forest as water catchment area.

"We congratulate the project organiser for the planning noble initiative for the young PTNP stakeholders. The school authority is always looking forward to working closely with the organiser in conducting similar projects," Chong said.

SK Bario headmistress Dora Tingan hoped similar programmes could be conducted more frequently to enable more students to participate.

Both she and Chong even suggested to combine a few schools such as SK Bario and SK Pa' Dalih to make the programme more interesting and promote greater students interaction.

Similar programmes, they said, should also be drawn up for teachers around Bario.

"With the EEP, the teachers will be able to explain the environmental issues and adopt some of the lessons learnt in many related subjects," Chong noted.

To better facilitate the activities in future, it was suggested the schools could form an environmental club and members would be adopted by the project as "The Friends of Pulong Tau."

Some fish ponds in Ba Kelalan, Punang Kelalan/Long Muda, Buduk Bui and Buduk Aru and Bario were launched by ITTO International representatives from Switzerland, Dr Blaser and Chiho Horiuchi from Japan, led by Dr Chai, on September 10 and 11 in conjunction with the ITTO/TBCA project steering committee meeting in Miri.

Apart from the fish ponds, the project organiser had also helped develop salt mines in Ba Kelalan, particularly at Punang Kelalan and Long Kumap, by providing materials such as zinc sheets and cauldrons.

The project had also helped Kaum Wanita Bario improve their community hall.

At the request of the local communities the project helped to locate and map their cultural sites.

The survey, completed in 2006, had mapped 88 cultural sites including 41 burial sites, 42 megaliths and five non-megaliths.

A committee in each village was also formed at the advise with the help of the project organiser to help after the sites.

For the Penan community in Long Lobang, the project helped to construct a water-pipe supply and toilets and provided materials for the kitchen extension.

The community was also trained in fruit-tree cultivation and given seedlings such as those of langsung, rambutan, mangosteen, pandan coconut and star fruit. Future support will involve constructing water pipes for the Long Sabai community.

However, due to extremely difficult access, the assistance has to be extended to the Phase II, starting next

year.

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