

A rare Rafflesia find

STORY AND PICTURES BY
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SO there it was, perched at an angle between the roots of a tree: the *Rafflesia cantleyi*, its petals a striking red and white. The Rafflesia boasts the biggest flowers in all of nature but the cantleyi, with a flower measuring 55cm in diameter, is not the biggest of the Rafflesias.

Still, to the first-time visitors who had trekked half an hour into the forest from Kampung Ulu Geroh, about 12km from Gopeng, Perak, to see it, this single *Rafflesia cantleyi* was about the most beautiful thing they had ever seen.

"The *Rafflesia cantleyi* is at its most striking in the first four days of blooming. By the fifth and sixth day, the flower starts to blacken and wither," said Umar Sara, an Orang Asli who is chairman of the Sahabat Ekopelancongan dan Memulihara Alam Indah (SEMAI), a group that has taken up the task of preserving the Rafflesia. The Orang Asli here have stopped the practice of selling Rafflesia buds and are focusing on preserving and nurturing the area's tourism potential instead.

It was through their initiative that we, a group comprising Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) members from Kuala Lumpur and Perak, as well as journalists and other officials, came to check out the how the Rafflesia was doing.

The forest surrounding the Ulu Geroh area is one of the most accessible sites for Malaysians to see the *Rafflesia cantleyi* and interesting flora like wild ginger, forest fungi, wild begonias and jewel orchids. It is also home to the famed Rajah Brooke Birdwing butterflies and endangered species like the Malayan sun bear, white-handed gibbon, mousedeer and rare birds like the bat hawk, crested serpent eagle and the dusky broadbill.

However, there are still not many visitors here yet. In the past five months, the Orang Asli have received less than 300 visitors. Umar said they hoped tour operators would come forward to help promote their village

to eco-tourists and foreign visitors. "We are having some problems marketing the site, and so we hope our companies can somehow help us out by offering packages to Ulu Geroh. Although we'd like to have more visitors, we also want to preserve the Rafflesia habitat by limiting groups to 10 or 20 people per trip," he said.

For now, most of the visitors are brought in by MNS members.

SEMAI, which was formed with the help of the MNS, the Perak Forestry Department and the Perak Orang Asli Affairs Department, has 12 active members and is funded by the United Nations Development Programme-Global Environment Facility's small grants project.

Umar said the Orang Asli realised they could better supplement their income by bringing people in and charging them a reasonable sum to visit the site.

"By promoting the Rafflesia and the butterflies on a wider scale, we hope to be financially independent someday," he said.

For RM57 per person, SEMAI takes visitors on a day trip to a Rajah Brooke colony and a trek to the Rafflesia site, finishing with a trek to the Damak waterfall for a swim.

SEMAI deputy chairman Bah Azmi Ngah Porgi, 31, said that for some reason, the Rajah Brooke butterflies tend to congregate in large numbers at moist spots known as "salt licks" to feed on nourishment from the mineral water.

One of these spots is just a five-minute walk from Kampung Ulu Geroh. Here, visitors can expect to see dozens of the butterflies resting on the jungle floor, their wings fluttering gently. From here, it is a 30-minute hike to the nearest Rafflesia site, over a bridge on the Ulu Geroh River and into the forest, where the lucky will be able to see a Rafflesia in bloom.

"The Rafflesia might also be found in other sites but it could take up to

90 minutes to reach them. Guests are free to take pictures with the Rafflesia, but they mustn't touch the petals as they are very sensitive," said Bah Azmi.

As the Orang Asli like to tell visitors, Malaysia is the home to eight of the 21 known species of Rafflesias in the world.

Apart from the Rajah Brooke, the area is also home to many other species of butterflies. According to a 2000 survey by MNS, there are over 60 species of butterflies in the forest surrounding Ulu Geroh alone, 53 of which are common, six uncommon and three rare.

After the trek to the waterfalls, visitors are treated to refreshments at the SEMAI group headquarters at Kampung Ulu Geroh. However, meals are not provided in the package, so visitors are encouraged to bring their own picnic baskets.

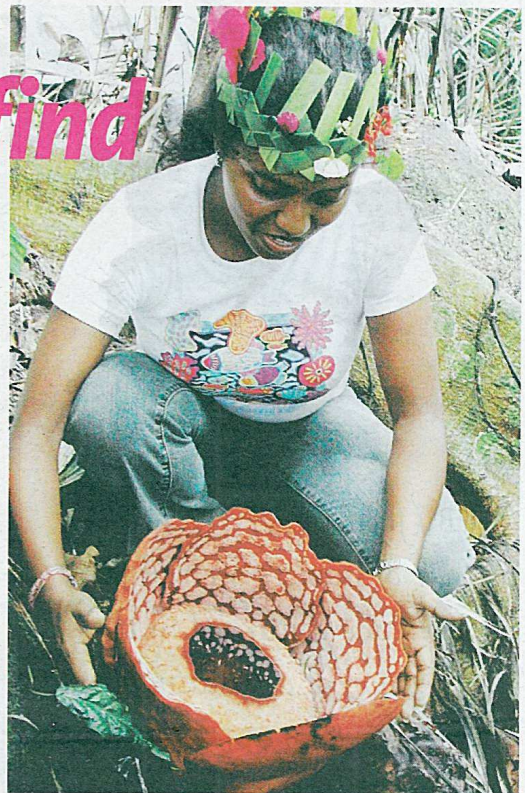
Umar said they were also considering providing home stays for visitors who wanted to experience life in an Orang Asli home. "We have a few families who are willing to take in guests," he said.

Kampung Ulu Geroh head Ngah Sidin Hamzah felt that the Orang Asli's ability to sustain their conservation efforts in the area depended on whether the area would be gazetted as a permanent forest reserve. They have expressed concern over logging activities uphill, which they claim have polluted four of their rivers.

Bah Azmi said the rivers and waterfalls were supposed to be one of their village's strongest attractions for tourists, but these were becoming increasingly dirty and muddy after a rainstorm due to erosion.

MNS vice-president Datuk Dr Hashim Abdul Wahab said the society would propose to the Forestry Department that the area be gazetted as a permanent reserve, adding that studies would be conducted first to ascertain the extent of the threat. Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamad Tajul Rosli Ghazali has promised to look into the matter after reviewing studies conducted on the area. **W**

□ Discounts for the day trips are available for MNS members, scientists and schoolchildren aged six to 12. Those interested can contact Umar at 012-6456254 or Bah Azmi at 012-4140271.



MNS science officer G. Chitra Devi carefully measuring the size of this *Rafflesia cantleyi*. The flower can grow up to 55cm and usually looks its best for only four days before it starts to wither.



The Orang Asli of Kampung Ulu Geroh performing a sewang dance.

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