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Forest Guardian: Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor leading the way in conservation!

By [Elena Koshy](#) - November 27, 2022 @ 10:01am



Tan Sri Dato' Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor.

THE huge buttressed trunks with their massive canopies filter out nearly all the light, so there are almost no other plants on the dim forest floor, as we walk silently and unimpeded over the soft earth and the fallen leaves.

The diminutive man ahead of me stops suddenly and looks up, his expression unreadable. "There are about 120 species of dipterocarp trees here," he says simply, breaking the silence. He continues to walk around, sure-footed in this small enclave of towering trees.

"This place is so remarkably beautiful," I say, breathlessly. "Remarkably natural!" retorts Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor, waving his arms around the trees, before adding quietly: "I spent a good part of my career in this place."

By "this place" he means the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (Frim), where the former director-general (DG) once held court. His leadership at Frim had seen the

institute grow from a small obscure institute to a world-class tropical forest research institute.

Under his helm, Frim developed numerous research and conservation programmes that have laid the foundation for good forest management and conservation of natural resources in the country.

"Meet me at the Dipterocarp Arboretum," his message had pinged on my phone earlier that day. I had no idea where that was. The security guards at the entrance looked just as puzzled. "*Tak tahu, puan*, (I don't know, ma'am)" they said apologetically while shrugging their shoulders and waving me in.

Mentioning Tan Sri Dr Salleh's name was an "Open Sesame" incantation that allowed me to get past the buttress into the yawning 545-hectare compound where trees of every size stood as green sentinels on either side of the road, filtering the bright late morning sun. Peering amongst thickets of green were blocks of buildings. "Insecta" read one sign. "Biotechnology Building" read another.

"I don't know where the arboretum is." I finally messaged Salleh, feeling a little defeated after 10 minutes of driving and trying to peer at all the signages, some of which were obscured by tree branches. My phone pinged almost immediately. "I've already passed the guardhouse. I'll pick you up. Let me know where you're at," he replied.

Moments later, a nondescript grey car rolled to a stop near the sidewalk where I was waiting. The window rolled down, and he flashed that familiar grin. "Get in!" he instructed gaily. The elderly man at the wheel confidently navigated the spiderweb of roads that snaked through this little green paradise located in the heart of the city.

"I used to stay here," he murmured, pointing out the many trees that line the road. "What's that tree called?" he quizzed me suddenly, one hand on the steering wheel, while the other pointed to a towering tree by the side of the road. He didn't wait for an answer, of course. "That's a keruing tree!" he said blithely. Ah, that question brought back memories.

I first met Salleh in 2008 when I was a much-younger (and less jaded) nature advocate. He'd just been re-elected as president of Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), the venerable bastion of nature conservation, the oldest and one of the most prominent environmental, not-for-profit non-governmental organisations in the country.

I recall being a little intimidated by this fiery man with a larger-than-life personality. He'd descend upon our nature events — bright and alert in his trademark black MNS T-shirt — suffering no fools, yet willing to lend gravitas to our simple, bare-boned events with his presence.



The writer (right) with Salleh (centre) back in 2010 when she was working at the Malaysian Nature Society.

No event was too small or big for the then-Datuk Seri. He could easily be cutting ribbons at one function, beamingly giving prizes away to raucous students at a School Nature Club event, hobnobbing with high society to raise funds for conservation, hunkering down with the MNS council members for meetings, or negotiating to protect a prime forested area with government officials at yet another meeting.

"What's that tree called?" he asked me once, pointing to a tall tree I was standing under. Clutching my clipboard, I stared at him wordlessly.

I could almost picture my own expression in that moment — a rictus of absolute panic. An on-the-spot nature quiz from the MNS president? It's like finally meeting Cristiano Ronaldo, only to be challenged to a free-kick contest.

"It's a keruing tree," continued the former forester, thankfully not waiting for me to answer. He slapped my back in glee before walking away jauntily, leaving me more than a little flustered.

"You've got to save the forests and contribute towards conservation in this country!" he'd say severely while wagging his finger, looking more like an irate grandfather schooling the younger generation on how to behave. That was the gist of all his messages. Save the forests. Stop logging. Protect nature.

He was already hitting his seventies 70s back then, but that had never slowed him down. Salleh is famously very vocal and would never bat an eyelid about making strong statements against logging and forest clearing.



The exuberant ex-DG of FRIM intends to champion nature and sustainability for as long as he can.

Rumour has it that he'd threatened on more than one occasion to tie himself to a tree and face-off with loggers. He remains unafraid of challenging gargantuan projects detrimental to the environment, and successfully championed the gazettement of Endau-Rompin and Belum as national and state parks respectively, as well as getting the Kota Damansara Forest protected from development.



With YAM Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra Al Haj, the patron of the Endau Rompin Expedition.

From leading scientific expeditions into the forests and seeking audience with government agencies to plead the cause of nature, right up to unapologetically treading on toes and being the perennial gadfly with his off-the-cuff caustic statements about logging and protecting our natural heritage, Salleh has been tirelessly advocating nature for decades.

He was the first director-general of Forest Research Institute Malaysia (Frim) before retiring in 1995. He was elected president of the International Union of Forest Research Organisations (IUFRO), the first person from outside Europe and America in the 100-year history of IUFRO.

Salleh was a member of the inaugural Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam), former chairman of the Board of Trustees of Kolej Universiti Terengganu (KUT), now known as Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), inaugural chairman of Malaysian Bio-Industry Organisation (MBIO), and inaugural fellow, past vice-

president, former secretary-general and council member of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia (ASM). He's now a senior fellow of ASM.

And here we are again, years after that first meeting. There's no sitting down at a nice air-conditioned office for Salleh. Instead, he walks around trees with me trailing behind, slapping at mosquitoes while trying hard to ignore the tragic sight of my earth-caked shoes.

"These are valuable trees," he remarks. "The dipterocarps are a family of hardwood, tropical trees that produces resin." Dipterocarp forests, according to Salleh, are already known among foresters as being the tallest and most diverse rainforests in the world.

This also means it's great timber potential. Much of the lowland forests covering Southeast East Asia have been logged or cleared for agriculture. In 2010, Malaysia had 20.3 million hectares of natural forest, extending over 87 per cent of its land area. In 2020, it lost 122,000 hectares of natural forest, equivalent to 85.2 metric tonnes of CO₂ (carbon dioxide) emissions.

"I'm thankful I've seen some positive changes. But the fight is ongoing," he says quietly, adding vehemently: "My stand is very simple. As long as you've nothing to gain, as long as you've no vested interest, you shouldn't be afraid to speak out and stand on your principles. I've no vested interest in logging nor do I want to destroy nature for personal gain. I just want to save our natural heritage for our future generation. I'm not afraid to speak out and do what I can to protect our forests."

But there's an oddly muted quality to these declarations, though they're certainly heartfelt. It seems likely that the 82-year-old Salleh has reserves of anger and heartbreak about the plight of the forest he'd spent his career documenting, but his professional mode is polite optimism.

He goes quiet again. The sound of dried leaves crackles loudly beneath his sandalled feet as he walks slowly around that little enclave of dipterocarp trees.

A while later, he turns to look at me. His eyes are as bright and twinkling as how I remembered them all those years ago. "I'm 82 now and living on borrowed time!" His tone is matter-of-fact, almost gleeful even.

AN INDELIBLE MARK



A passionate advocate for nature (and a tree hugger!).

Why go down the thankless path of conservation? I ask curiously. He seems mildly surprised by my question. "In Bahasa Malaysia, a forester is a *rimbawan*. When I was appointed a forester, my official job title in my employment letter was *pemuliharaan hutan*. As a conservator of forests, you have to conserve! As a *pemuliharaan hutan*, you have to *peliharaan hutan* (protect the forests)! It's as fundamental as that," he replies at length. It was a duty and he was more than willing to take it on.

Case in point was when he was given the unenviable task of undertaking forest resources inventory for the Forest Resources Reconnaissance Survey (FRRS) at the beginning of his professional career after graduating.

"Nine of us joined at the same time, but none of them wanted to do forest inventory," he recalls, adding bluntly: "They all wanted to be district forest officers, sitting behind the desk, being a *tuan* and approving licences!"

Salleh spent months doing fieldwork in the forest, undertaking forest inventory which formed the foundation for the national land use planning for the country. "How was the experience?" I ask. "Oh, fantastic!" he replies enthusiastically, adding: "I enjoyed every minute of it."

Carrying out a forest inventory was simple enough, he recalls. Lay out the plots, measure the trees and make the report. However, the experience opened his eyes to the wonders of the tropical rain forest and left an indelible mark in his heart.

Since then, it has been his main focus to telegraph to the world the wondrous capabilities of trees. Trees store carbon dioxide and oxygenate the air, making them "the best and only thing we have right now to fight climate change and do it fast," he insists.



Graduating with M.Sc in 1974.

He went on to take up a 13-month course on Forest Photo-Interpretation at the International Institute for Aerial Survey and Earth Sciences (ITC) in Delft, the

Netherlands. Salleh was then awarded a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to study for his MSc, and followed by a federal government scholarship to study for his PhD at Michigan State University.

In 1977, Salleh was appointed the director of Forest Research Institute (FRI) Kepong, a unit of the Forestry Department in Peninsular Malaysia. Eight years later, the institute was transformed into a statutory body and the Malaysia Forestry Research and Development Board (MFRDB) was formed to administer the institute, which was subsequently named Forest Research Institute Malaysia (Frim). The passionate forester was appointed its first director-general.

Under his leadership, Frim evolved from a small obscure institute to a world-class tropical forest research institute. Numerous research and conservation programmes were developed in this institute, which laid the foundation for good forest management and conservation of natural resources in the country.

In Frim, Salleh, with his band of research officers and scientists, cultivated an arboreal Noah's Ark of rare and hardy specimens that can best withstand a warming planet.

"The mega diversity of the Malaysian forests is tremendous. There's still a lot to be done in forestry research, especially with the increasing global concerns on climate change, water and loss of biodiversity," he asserts.

The retired DG is certainly proud of how far the institute has come since the early days. "The days in FRI and Frim were among the most rewarding years of my life," he says, pride in his voice. "I've managed to leave a legacy that's still remembered to this day."



The forest remains Salleh's second home.

One morning, he recounts, as he was driving to the office from his house through the arboreta, he met an Englishman who was visiting Frim. Salleh offered him a lift, but the man declined. Instead, he told the then-DG: "I always had a vision of what paradise would be like, but never felt and experienced it until I came to Frim!"

As we continue strolling in the arboretum, I can see what the man meant. As in many other forests, the trees share space with ground — their roots buckling the floor into petrified hillocks while dried leaves crackle beneath my feet. There's sunlight, but even it is greenish, as if filtered through a screen of chlorophyll. It feels almost ethereal.

'BUDAK KAMPUNG'



A true 'orang kampung'.

It's hard to imagine that the passionate forester and nature advocate wasn't born into a life of "science". "I came from a very poor family. My father was a rubber trapper and a driver while my mother was a homemaker," reveals Salleh.

He describes his childhood as idyllic, but poor, recalling that he looked after cows and goats when he wasn't at school. "I was known in my *kampung* as *budak jaga lembu* (boy who looks after cows)." In the evenings, he'd take his herd of cows to graze along the side of the main Kuala Pilah-Tampin road as there were good grass growing there.



Salleh (centre) playing d'Artagnan of 'The Three Musketeers' back in school.

The cows needed to be watched, but the young boy would choose to read his book instead. Being an avid reader back then, he'd take along a library book whenever he had to watch over his cows.

"My favourite author was Enid Blyton and I loved *The Famous Five* series!" says Salleh gleefully. He'd be so engrossed in his book that the cows would inevitably stray to the road. This infuriated drivers who then had to brake suddenly.

"They'd yell and shout obscenities at me. Nevertheless, as the saying goes: 'Sticks and stones will hurt my bones, but words will never hurt me!'" He laughs heartily at that recollection.

As the top student in his school, and subsequently at the Federation Military College, Salleh dreamt of becoming a medical doctor. "Every year, the Ministry of Defence Ministry would award a medical scholarship to the top student. I was banking on that scholarship to pursue my studies."



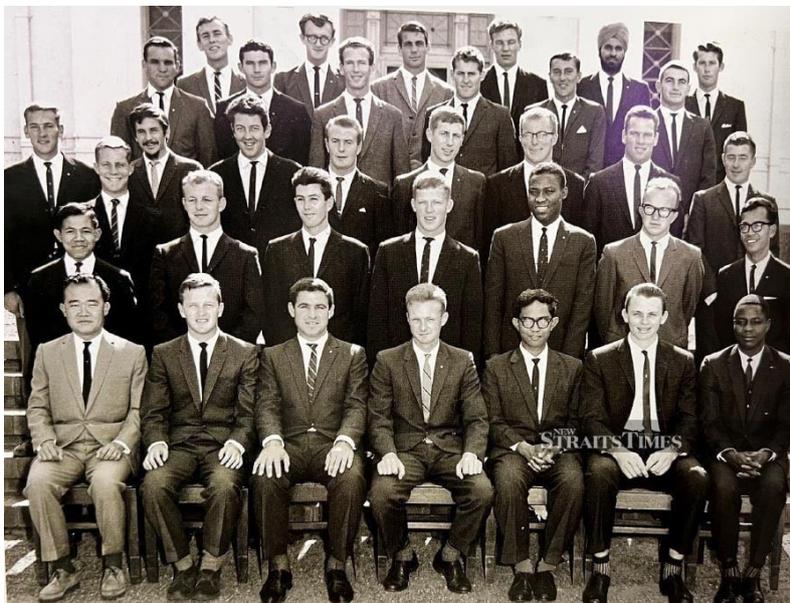
Receiving the Director of Studies prize at the Federation Military College.

Adding, he shares: "But when my year came along, the scholarship wasn't offered. It was devastating as I was so confident of getting it that I didn't bother applying for any other scholarships." Thankfully, a scholarship under the Colombo Plan to study forestry came along and he immediately applied for it.

One of the reasons he was keen to take up forestry was his desire to go overseas! "My uneducated father was a driver and his job took him to New York and London. If he could do it, I too wanted to do the same... go overseas!" he explains, eyes twinkling.

After receiving the scholarship, Salleh left for Sydney from the Sungai Besi airport with his whole village of jubilant relatives and friends seeing him off.

The *budak jaga lembu* certainly made it good and went off on an adventure that far surpassed the stories he read as a child. "I was the first boy from my village of Kampong Inas, Johol, to obtain a scholarship to study overseas," says Salleh, proudly.



The graduating class of 1964m including Salleh (first row, standing far left).

There's no fool proof algorithm for life's choices, but Salleh's decision led him to a glittering career in forestry and conservation; one that eventually saw him receiving the prestigious Merdeka Award twice in his lifetime.

One, on behalf of the Malaysian Nature Society for their outstanding contributions towards the protection of Belum-Temengor, and secondly, when Salleh himself became a recipient for his tireless advocacy for nature and sustainable development.



Receiving the inaugural Merdeka Award for environment for the Malaysian Nature Society in 2008.

"*Alhamdulillah*, I've led a full and contented life," he says quietly. "There's little I regret. I only wish I could have done more to protect our natural heritage, but I'm thankful that my efforts haven't gone in vain."

Age hasn't stopped the octogenarian from continuing to advocate for nature.

"Throughout my career, I've strictly abided to what my late father told me when I was young: 'If it's not yours, don't take it'. We're only custodians of our natural heritage. The forest is for everyone, not just for the selected few with vested interests," asserts Salleh, voice low.

How do you encourage people to care for the environment or make a difference? His face brightens. "Very easy!" he exclaims. "Join the Malaysian Nature Society. If you're still going to school, join the School Nature Clubs (Kelab Pencinta Alam or KPA). Be part of a greater cause!"

How does he stay buoyant? "I've been fantastically lucky, I suppose. I've been everywhere I've ever wanted to be," muses Salleh. He's certainly been "everywhere".



At the summit of the highest peak in Peninsular Malaysia, 1999.

Back in 2012, the then-72-year-old earned the distinction of being the oldest Malaysian to reach the Everest Base Camp. He's been to Antarctica four times, and there's still no stopping him. I ask whether, at the age of 82, he has ever got to a stage of "seen it, done it"? And, if so, how has he maintained his curiosity, his exceptional and obvious life force?

He inhales. For an instant it seems there's no real answer on his lips. "Look around you," he finally replies. I do. "How do you get tired of this?" he asks quietly. It's a rhetorical question, I know.

There's little need for further explanation. A quote from the naturalist Sir David Attenborough comes to mind: "It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement, the greatest source of visual beauty, the greatest source of intellectual interest. It's the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living."

Salleh continues to stroll amongst the trees in quiet serenity. It's midday, but the muted sunlight casts long shadows into this little enclave of tall trees.

In that moment, it becomes clear to me that I'm in the company of giants. Counted amongst them is the smiling, diminutive man standing under the shade of a towering tree.

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