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The mark of safety, reliability and trust.
Malaysia: responsibility in the factory and deep in the forests

Foresters passionate about the sustainable trees they manage

JIM BOWDEN

RESPONSIBLE… we counted its repetition 17 times during presentations at the Malaysian Timber Conference in Kuala Lumpur in mid-October.

Only in the last two years have Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam and Indonesia moved to develop real import regulations on illegally-logged timber in their markets.

But none has embraced forest ‘responsibility’ as passionately and for so long as Malaysia, seen as the pioneer of tropical forest certification.

The Malaysian Timber Certification Scheme was the first for tropical timber in the Asia-Pacific region, utilising ITTO standards and endorsed by the Program for Endorsement of Forest Certification since 2009.

More than 4.45 million ha covering seven forest plantation units and 13 forest management units have been certified under the MTCS – the largest in the world for tropical forests.

Such adherence to sustainable forest management has won Malaysia export markets in more than 160 countries. As a PEFC-endorsed scheme, the MTCS is also recognised under ‘green’ building schemes in Australia, Italy, Singapore, the Netherlands, UK, Canada, USA, Japan and the United Arab Emirates.

Malaysia holds true to two main components to this certification process – the upholding of internationally-agreed forest management standards and chain of custody.

Malaysia’s commitment to maintaining forest cover at above 50% – pledged at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit – will ensure the timber industry remains sustainable in the long-term.

Almost half of the total land area or 14.55 million ha in Malaysia is protected as permanent reserved forests, managed for their economic, social and conservation values. Today, more than 70% of the total PRFs are set aside for sustainable management of timber, while the remaining areas are strictly protected as ‘protection forests’.

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virgin jungle reserves and conservation areas.

The total area planted under Malaysia’s forest plantation development program, administered by the Ministry of Primary Industries and implemented in 2017, is 114,000 ha. An additional target of 7-8 ha is expected to be planted by end of this year.

Most of the projects funded under this program will be harvested beginning 2021, with an expected yield of 700,000 cub m of timber as a start.

Each of the 13 states in Malaysia is required by law to draw up forest management plans based on the concept of rational land use and multiple functions of the forests.

Ahead of MTC’s inaugural timber conference, an invited group of foreign journalists was taken in 4WD convoys to state forest operations and logging sites on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula.

With the monsoonal season under way, the pushing and sliding through thick orange mud on forest roads was a new and exhilarating experience for some European writers.

It was at the state forest in Perak, the fourth-largest of Malaysia’s 13 states, that we saw how deep the responsibility for forest management has been planted. State forestry officers openly showed their passion and responsibility for the forests, taking the visitors off road and among the trees to explain the benefits of selective harvesting and the growth rates of various species.

The Perak Forestry Department’s management unit comprises 991,436 ha of permanent reserved forest of the state’s total land area of 2,102,122 ha. The inland consists mainly of hill and upper hill Dipterocarp forests.
— the tallest and most diverse forests in the world. The annual allowable cut is set at 7770 ha and for a three-year period, the harvest amounted to only 22,000 ha.

In terms of socio-economic contribution, forestry has been an important economic sector within Perak; it supports a workforce of 5101 mainly in the logging and sawmilling industries.

(Perak’s (Malay word for silver) administrative capital of Ipoh historically was the tin-mining capital of the world until the price of the metal collapsed, so timber, and to a lesser extent palm oil, dominate the landscape and the region’s revenue today. The visitors also enjoyed an inspection of the Royal Selangor factory where the metal alloy pewter – mostly tin mixed with copper and sometimes silver – is crafted).

More than 55% of Malaysia is under natural forest and home to some 2650 tree species, many of which are valued commercially.

Years of intensive R&D have introduced renowned timbers popular in Australia such as balau for decking, merbau and kempas for flooring, and dark red meranti for doors and windows.

Back in the Perak state forest, the visiting writers from South Africa, the Netherlands, the US and China at various times were scrutinised by hovering drones in a demonstration of the Peninsular Malaysia Forestry Department’s latest technology to combat illegal logging and wildlife poaching. Another demonstration of forest responsibility.

The drones are also used to monitor changes in forest cover in real time, which has had a big impact on tree management.

The drones, along with integrated technology such as hyperspectral imaging using satellite imagery, make enforcement more effective when it comes to forest encroachment, unlicensed logging and other offences in the forest. It also helps identify high-risk areas and illegal logging hotspots.

The forestry department is also developing a turnkey hyperspectral imaging system to increase the effectiveness of aerial observations. This has an operational range 10 times greater than methods used now, with a detection capability range of 2000 km.