

contributed significantly to environmental sustainability.

A LOSING BATTLE

He smiles wistfully when I mention the Merdeka Award, and for a while he sits silently, lost in thought. "I did write about that recently on my Facebook page," he mentions idly after a while. It was four years ago, he recalled in his post, that he received the most coveted award in his career from NRS, the Sultan of Perak. "I remember that moment distinctly."

In his acceptance speech, Latiff reminded the audience of the utmost need to protect and conserve Malaysia's rich biodiversity, her ecosystems, species of flora and fauna and the environment at large. "It's disappointing," he remarks, sighing. "As I said in my post, I'm not sure now after four years that my honest call might have fallen on blind eyes and deaf ears."

He's "pissed off" with politicians, he confides. Strong words from the mild-mannered academician, but disappointment is clearly etched all over his face. Years of lobbying to conserve Malaysia's natural heritage, navigating political agendas while having to deal with empty words and broken promises have made him weary and a little disillusioned, he admits.

Shrugging his shoulders despondently, he murmurs, "What we managed to protect isn't enough."

His sombre mood persists even when I bring up the 2007 establishment of the Royal Belum State Park in Perak, which remains one of the biggest wins for conservation groups and environmental lobbyists in Malaysia.

The Belum-Temengor Forest Complex (BTFC) is said to be more than 130 million years old, older even than the Amazon forest or the Congo Basins. For a forest which has withstood the test of time, the biodiversity of this forest is unique and none like any other.

Spread over 300,000 ha, the stunning landscape of the rainforest houses over three thousand species of flowering plants. It includes three species of Rafflesia, the iconic giant flower and is also the natural habitat of some very unique species of ferns and mosses.

Latiff led one of the earliest scientific

expeditions to that area, back in the 1990s. "It was heaven of course to the biologist in me!" he exclaims. However, the quest to secure BTFC's protection from the pressures of poaching and logging remains half completed.

"We thought we won half of the battle, and that it'd pave the way for securing the other half of the forest complex," he recalls. Conservation lobbyists, including Latiff, had wanted the entire BTFC protected and was given the assurance that the Temengor forest complex would also be considered for protection once logging concessions were finished by 2011.

When the deadline approached, extensions were given to concessionaires until 2014. "Until today, logging is still going on," he mentions wryly, adding bluntly: "It seems like we're constantly losing battle after battle."

BIRTH OF A CONSERVATIONIST

The idea of being in a war of sorts where losses are imminent is something the professor has taken in his stride. "Conservation is an applied science; it's all about helping people take action," he explains. And in his case, confronting humans with the natural world has been, for most part, his life's work.

But it wasn't always that way, admits Latiff, saying, "When I was an undergraduate, I wasn't really sensitive to environmental issues." Born in Kelantan in 1948, he received his early education at the Parang Pating National School and Merbau English School in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. Latiff attended secondary school at the Sultan Ismail College and later continued his studies at the University of Malaya (UM) where he obtained his Bachelor of Science.

Why pursue science? I ask him, half-expecting him to reveal a childhood fascination for plants and trees. "Let's put this way," he begins, "Back then when we were young, we never had counsellors. I didn't have anybody within my family who could tell me what to do with my life."

He simply followed the natural course set by the Education ministry at that time. "I did well in school, so I fell into the Science stream," he shares candidly, quipping: "Then, when I went on to UM, I was 'cheated' by my lecturers who told me that Botany is a wonderful subject... so



Latiff (second from left) among the Merdeka Awardees in 2015.

I did botany!"

It was at UM where, inspired and encouraged by his lecturer and mentor, the late Dr BC Stone, Latiff began to take an interest in plant taxonomy. "All I knew then was to study hard as competition was tough," he recalls. In September 1974, he went to the University of Reading, England where he received his Masters of Science in Pure and Applied Plant Taxonomy and subsequently, his PhD in Plants Systematics.

It was in England that Latiff began to be aware of how different things were over there. "I finally saw what a clean river was supposed to look like!" he recalls. Historical deforestation and industrialisation had already left the UK "among the most nature-depleted countries in the world" recalls Latiff, saying: "So the people I met there were sensitive towards the loss of habitat and wildlife, and spoke a lot about environmental issues. Everyone talked about it."

He returned to Malaysia in 1978 and assumed a position as lecturer at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. "I naturally fell into teaching," he shares, smiling. It was only a decade later, that Dr. Rahimatsah Amat, then the chief technical officer of WWF roped him to travel to Perlis, to canvas strongly for the establishment of a state park. "He was a close friend of mine," explains Latiff, adding that it marked the beginning of a remarkable journey of using his brand of science to pursue the cause of conservation.

CHAMPIONING A CAUSE

The septuagenarian is stretched out in a comfortable chair behind his cluttered desk, a seat he'd rise from several times when a whimsical mood strikes him during a spirited conversation about plants, forests and of course, conservation.

"If you look over here," Latiff gets up and points to the topmost shelf above him. "These volumes from 1 to 24 contain the findings of expeditions I conducted in all kinds of forests across Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak almost every year!"

These expeditions carried out investigations into the physical, biological and socio-economic environments. Upon completion of every scientific expedition, Latiff conducted scientific seminars to explain his findings. The generation of data from these expeditions was to prove to the state authorities that they possess something inherently priceless.

While these adventures led him to remarkable forested areas where he came into contact with pristine forests,

clean rivers and abundant wildlife, there was the flip side that saw evidence of forest degradation on a disturbing scale. Deforestation is a particular concern in tropical rainforests, he stresses, because these forests are home to much of the world's biodiversity. "We've been cheated," he remarks morosely.

"When somebody takes out hectares containing precious species of plants, trees and a whole heap of wildlife, you realise that's an irreversible act," says Latiff. "It's like taking the Mona Lisa and burning her and then somebody says, 'Well we can repaint it!' It's never going to be quite the same."

The weight of this loss drove him to meet with forestry and wildlife officers, politicians and people in authority, state by state. "I had to do something," he says simply, shrugging his shoulders. Yet, for all his carousing, he felt he didn't make much headway in almost every state.

"We lost Kelantan, we lost Terengganu, we lost Pahang and Johor, we fought for a state park in Selu where we got only 5,000 hectares," he relates matter-of-factly, sounding like a beret politician who'd lost at the polls.

But there were wins, I insist. He shrugs his shoulders in response. "Small wins, yes. How I wish I had more of a fighting spirit," he laments. He admits to not being much of a "fighter", saying: "I'm a negotiator wanting to appeal to people's better sense."

He bluntly admits to being too philosophical and being too "professional" in arguing for conservation. "I was too textbook but how else can I fight?" he ponders. That's who you are, I counter comfortingly. He isn't placated, sighing deeply.

During one of his meetings with government officials, he was asked the cost of the forest, the elephants and the tigers. "I couldn't answer. How could it be difficult to put a value on the importance of conservation," says Latiff heavily.

Be it as it may be, he says that the struggle is far from over. He'll continue to lobby as much as he can, and mentor his students so they can continue championing for nature in years to come. That's the legacy, he says, he wants to leave behind.

Concludes Latiff: "I'm passionate about conservation, and that makes me passionate about education. Whether it's trying to educate a federal environment minister, the people who read the newspaper, NGOs or my students, it's all about dialogue, values and how to do things better."



Out in the field in Sarawak.