On a mission to save the environment

'PAK TEH': 2015 Merdeka Award recipient grateful for recognition of conservation efforts

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GROWING up in a kampung has inspired Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Abdul Latiff Mohamad to pursue a career in science.

The 67-year-old, better known as 'Pak Teh' among his friends, described himself as a hard-working person who had proved that consistent efforts in environmental conservation programmes paid off, with him bringing home awards.

The most recent one is the 2015 Merdeka Award, which recognises and rewards individuals and organisations whose works and achievements have created a positive and significant impact on Malaysia and its people.

Speaking to the New Straits Times, Latiff, who works at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), said he was grateful to be recognised for his contributions to research and understanding of plant taxonomy and conservation biology in Malaysia.

"I think my interest in science must have come from my background. I was a kampung boy who lived among padi fields."

"My primary school's roof was made of nipah leaves, with walls of bamboo and dirt floors," he recalled.

Latiff received his early education at the Parang Puting National School and Merbau English School in Kota Baru, Kelantan.

He then attended Sultan Ismail College where the science-stream student showed interest in Science and Technology.

"When you grow up in a kampung, everything is beautiful and pristine. The rivers are clean and in forestation. But when you go to the city, you see pollution in the water and there are no fish in the rivers. The greenery that I love so much was missing."

That drove him to pursue his studies in environmental conservation.

"I want to save it (the environment) for the next generation, for our children and grandchildren," said Latiff, who received his Bachelor of Science with Honours from the University of Malaya.

He received his Master of Science in Pure and Applied Plant Taxonomy in 1975 and his PhD in Plants Systematics (1979) from the University of Reading, England.

Surrounded by books in his study, Latiff has authored and edited 88 books on forest biodiversity and conservation biology, including 10 coffee-table books.

"I also published 549 scientific papers, of which 246 were in International Scientific Indexing journals.

"My works have also appeared in more than 300 publications as chapters in books and proceedings, as well as papers in proceedings," said Latiff, who has more than 40 years of experience in environmental conservation initiatives.

Among his research areas were the Malaysian flora, plant taxonomy and biodiversity.

Latiff also named one new genus of plant, the Nanhucius, and identified 18 new plant species Rafflesia tengku-adlinii, Dendroblum terenganuensis and Clusia sumatra.

He has also included new records to the flora of Malaysia that include Vatica sarawakensis, Madhuca pulchrorubra and Clusia aristolochioides.

Seven scientific plant names, such as Vatica latifl, Barringtonia latifl and Tetrisigma latifl, as well as two animal species (Ayonda latifl and melodea), were named in his honour.

Among his accomplishments were the Fellow of Linnean Society (1977), Fellow of the Malaysian Scientific Association, Fellow of the Malaysian Society of Applied Biology and Fellow of the Academy of Sciences Malaysia (2003).

Latiff believes in sustainable development for a balanced quality of life.

"I would like to see Malaysia become a high-income country, but we must also look after the environment. While we enjoy good living, we must not forget our role."

"If I were to die tomorrow, at least I knew I had done my bit for the future."

"Hopefully, my children and friends will carry on and make Malaysia a more beautiful country to live in," said Latiff, who served as World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia board chairman, National Natural Heritage committee member and member of a Malaysian delegate to the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation World Heritage Site conference.

In 1995, Latiff won the coveted Malaysia-Toray Award in Science and Technology and in 2004, the prestigious Langkawi Award in recognition of his contributions to efforts in sustainable development in the country, among others.

"In 2002, I was awarded the Darjah Paduka Sri Mahkota Kelantan by the Sultan of Kelantan, Sultan Ismail Petra," said Latiff.