

Policymakers urged to engage scientists

PUTRAJAYA: Education is a great equaliser, believes biodiversity expert Professor Tan Sri Zakri Abdul Hamid.

The science adviser to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has made it his mission to make Malaysians realise that their home-grown talents are as good as those in other countries.

"Malaysians should venture out on to the world stage and contribute to many global undertakings, simply because we are capable.

"My record is proof of that," he told the *New Straits Times* in an exclusive interview in his office here recently.

Zakri was recently appointed Senior Fellow by the Malaysian Science Academy, which carries the title of "academician" and is the highest recognition for a Fellow.

Having completed his initial studies at the College of Agriculture Malaya in 1969, he went on to complete his Bachelor's degree in Crop Science at Louisiana State University in 1972.

He undertook his postgraduate studies by completing his Master's degree in 1974 and PhD in 1976 in Plant Breeding at Michigan State University.

He then kicked off his teaching career as a lectur-

er in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1976.

He went on to become the deputy vice-chancellor of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (1992-2000) before being appointed director of the United Nations University of Advanced Studies in 2001.

Among his contributions was transforming the United Nations University's Yokohama-based Advanced Studies in Japan, when he was a director there, into an internationally respected research and training centre.

Among the milestones that Zakri was proud to recall were co-chairing the Board of Millennium Ecosystem Assessment project under the UN, being elected as Founding Chairman of the Intergovernmental Platform of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services and being one of the 26 members of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Scientific Advisory Board.

These days, Zakri's interests lean towards promoting science-policy interfaces, where scientists advise politicians on how science can help construct

better programmes and policies.

"In Malaysia, we (scientists) can help develop better policies to manage highlands. We cannot simply farm on slopes" said the father of five children, aged between 23 and 36.

"We also need to walk the talk in regard to balanced development," he said, adding that there had been much talk about development while preserving nature, but only a few countries could execute it.

"In 1992, the UN had the Earth Summit to halt biodiversity loss, but 10 years later, they could not meet the target as there are still unsustainable practices such as deforestation.

"In Malaysia, we only have about 300 tigers left while our Sumatran rhinoceroses are close to extinct, if they are not all gone already.

"I have healthy respect for the development of the economy, as people need jobs and higher incomes, but we must not be irresponsible," said the grandfather of two, who enjoys swimming, Pavarotti and P. Ramlee films.

He emphasised the need for politicians to have continuous talks with scientists as the latter can give recommendations to help develop policies.



Professor Tan Sri Zakri Abdul Hamid