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12-year mystery plant found to be new species

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KOTA KINABALU: A plant that sat in a herbarium for 12 years as an unsolved mystery has finally been unmasked — and it turns out to be a brand new species found only in Sabah.

Researchers from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) have confirmed the leafy newcomer as *Ardisia condensiflora*, a rare plant first collected at Tawau Hills Park in 2014. The discovery was officially published on May 26 in the international journal *Phytotaxa*.

UMS researcher Dr Avelinah Julius and Dr Timothy M.A. Utteridge of the Singapore Botanic Gardens carried out taxonomic work using specimens loaned from the Sabah Parks Herbarium, which proved vital in confirming the plant's identity.

According to UMS's Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ITBC), the species thrives in shaded lowland dipterocarp forests and along riverbanks inside Tawau Hills Park.

With only two recorded collections, it is considered endemic to Sabah and has been preliminarily assessed as "Vulnerable" under IUCN criteria due to its highly restricted range.

UMS Vice Chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Kasim Mansor described Sabah's forests as "living laboratories" that continue to yield surprises.

"Discoveries like this prove there is still much to explore, document and protect," he said.



The new species, known as *Ardisia condensiflora*, was discovered at Tawau Hills Park in 2014. – Picture courtesy of UMS

Dr Avelinah added that the find is a reminder of Borneo's hidden biodiversity.

"Scientific exploration, herbarium research and continuous conservation efforts are essential to ensure these species are not lost before they are even known to science," she said. – MM