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New plant species discovered in Tawau Hills Park

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TAWAU: A plant specimen first discovered in Tawau Hills Park in 2014 has been confirmed as a new species, now known as *Ardisia condensiflora*, after remaining unidentified in a herbarium for more than a decade.

In a statement on Friday, the Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ITBC) of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) said the species was identified by its researcher Dr Avelinah Julius in collaboration with Dr Timothy M.A. Utteridge of the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

The institute said the discovery was formally published on May 26 in the international botanical taxonomy journal *Phytotaxa* (Vol. 758, No. 3).

"*Ardisia condensiflora* was found in a shaded mixed lowland dipterocarp forest and along riverbanks within Tawau Hills Park. Detailed taxonomic and herbarium studies were conducted using specimens loaned from the Sabah Parks Herbarium," the statement said.

Researchers found that the species has only been recorded in Tawau Hills Park, making it endemic to Sabah.

Based on only two known collection records, the rare species has been given a preliminary conservation assessment of Vulnerable (VU D2).

The assessment follows the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List criteria following the species' highly restricted distribution, although it has yet to receive an official IUCN listing.

Meanwhile, UMS vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Kasim Mansor described Sabah's forests as among the world's most valuable 'living laboratories'.

"Discoveries such as this show that much remains to be explored, documented and protected," he said.

Since 2017, Dr Avelinah has contributed to the discovery and identification of at least five new *Ardisia* species in the region. — Bernama