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Wild Tuhau becoming harder to find

Daily Express (KK), Malaysia



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Sherell Jeffrey

KOTA KINABALU: Wild Tuhau populations are declining due to unsustainable harvesting, prompting researchers to publish a new guide aimed at helping communities cultivate the popular ginger-family plant.

The book, titled "Tuhau (Etlingera cocinea) Panduan Penanaman dan Penuaian", was launched during the International Conference on Tropical Forestry 2026.

It was written by Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Faculty of Tropical Forestry's Ts Dr Elia Godoong, together with Yayasan Sabah Group's Dr Hamzah Tangki and Dr Yap Sau Wai.

The launch was officiated by Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability Minister Datuk Seri Arthur Joseph Kurup and witnessed by UMS Vice Chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Kasim Mansor, among others.

Elia said a five-year study found that wild tuhau populations were shrinking, largely due to unsustainable harvesting practices.

"Our five-year study found that wild tuhau populations are shrinking largely due to unsustainable harvesting habits," she said when met on the sidelines of the



Elia holding her book at her exhibition booth.

conference.

"The way they harvest tuhau is not sustainable. They harvest once for that time's production but it takes time for it to grow back, so it does not sustain the raw material," she said.

She said the decline had also pushed some harvesters to venture deeper into forests in search of the plant once supplies

in nearby areas were depleted.

Elia said even communities that had attempted to cultivate tuhau on a small commercial scale often struggled because they lacked proper planting knowledge.

"Many people from our study planted tuhau but were not successful. Now we teach them how to plant it so that at least the tuhau can grow," she said.

The 200-page book, aimed at the general public rather than academics, provides simple and low-cost planting and harvesting techniques that do not require chemicals or specialised equipment.

Elia said the aim was to encourage communities to cultivate tuhau in their own backyards instead of depending on wild harvesting, in line with the concept of home vegetable gardens long promoted in Sabah.

"We want the community to understand this without needing an academic background. This book can act as their reference," she said.

Among the findings featured in the book is that tuhau can be propagated through seeds, a method Elia said was largely unknown even among villagers who had long grown the plant.

She said the seeds were buried underground and were often eaten by animals before they could be collected.

However, a single batch of seeds could produce hundreds of seedlings that sprouted at the same time, potentially allowing for more organised cultivation and harvesting cycles.

Her research also identified three physical varieties of tuhau, although the plant remains a single species genetically.

Elia said the varieties came in red, white

and green forms, with the red variety having the strongest smell and the white variety the mildest.

This, she said, could provide an option for consumers who were sensitive to tuhau's strong aroma.

She added that tuhau was not unique to Sabah, with the plant also found in Peninsular Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, although many communities in those areas were unaware that it was edible.

Elia said interest in cultivating tuhau had also extended beyond the region, with her receiving book orders from individuals in Sweden and Denmark interested in growing the plant themselves.

The book was produced under a project funded through Sabah Forestry with support from the then Ministry of Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change (NRECC), now known as the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability (NRES).

Elia said the first print run was not for sale as it was funded for research purposes, but a second print run intended for public sale would be published by UMS Press.

Those interested in obtaining the book or visiting Elia's tuhau nursery at UMS can contact researcher Emmeldah Joseph at 014-7020378.



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SUMMARIES

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