

Pangolin conservation gets boost

NST 26.10.2018

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KOTA KINABALU: A Malaysian-born retired engineer now engaged in philanthropic work has offered to help set up a pangolin sanctuary in Sabah in the belief that Sabah can lead in pangolin conservation efforts.

Peter Chan, who has been working in the United States for 30 years, made the offer during a courtesy call on Deputy Chief Minister cum Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Datuk Christina Liew.

The Samaritan, who expressed his desire to work with nature, is also willing to make a substantial contribution from his endowments in the US, in funding the project dubbed Pangolin Conservation Initiative.

Given that the pangolin is now a totally protected species, Liew is elated that if Sabah blazes the trail in this endeavour with the support of the philanthropist, the proposed pangolin sanctuary will have the distinction of being the first of its kind in South-east Asia.

She said it is a most timely move as pangolins are highly poached in this part of the region.

"It is a good proposal which will generate immense interest among nature lovers and conservationists. I am excited about this laudable cause. We thank Chan for his initiative and unprecedented proposal.

He and Sabah's very own pangolin expert, Elisa Panjang, will be working on the proposal paper. Elisa is a well-known pangolin biologist.

"The paper will be presented formally to my Ministry by the end of November. The permanent secretary (Datuk Datu Rosmadi Datu Sulai) and Sabah Wildlife Department will study the paper whether the project is financially viable before we submit it for the government's consideration," she said in a statement.

Liew also emphasised the need to educate the public on the importance of conserving the pangolin, described as a secretive, rare and unique mammal.

Chan told the Minister that although he is not a career conservationist, he is very passionate about conservation work, and three months ago, friends recommended that he go to East Malaysia for pangolin conservation work.

"And that's how I found out about Elisa. I think with her expertise, she can run the programme. It can be a kind of public-private partnership and ideally, to be managed by the Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD).

"As far as I am concerned, I want to do something good for Sabah and there is no financial gain.

"Let's work together to achieve this goal. I don't want this thing to fail. That's why I am here. Other concerned Malaysians' help to attain this goal will be greatly appreciated.

"Once we get this project running, the next step is corporate sponsorship to make it financially sustainable. That's just the way to do it," Chan

said.

Briefing Liew on the pangolin, Elisa said one of the species, Sunda pangolin, is found throughout Sabah but concentrated in the pristine forests in Kinabatangan and Central Sabah in the Danum area.

"It is estimated that there are more than 1,000 pangolins left in Sabah. The pangolin is about 110cm long and weighs less than 15kg. It is a natural heritage but the population is severely threatened by poaching for the international illegal wildlife trade.

"This mammal is hunted for its meat (exotic food), scales (traditional medicine) and skin (accessories). If no conservation work is in place, we may ultimately lose them," she cautioned.

According to Elisa, the pangolins' habitat destruction in favour of development is a threat to their survival but poaching is the main threat.

It is an open secret that Chinese tourists go for pangolin meat which is served illegally in some restaurants known to illegal tour operators. It is difficult for the relevant authorities to catch the errant restaurant-owners as the latter are usually tipped-off about would-be raids on their premises.

However, Director of the Sabah Wildlife Department, Augustine Tuuga said offenders have been convicted of illegal possession of pangolin parts.

"Pangolins are easily targeted by poachers by virtue of their slow movement. It is a solitary mammal. Its only pro-



Liew thanking Chan for the latter's gesture. Also in the picture are Rosmadi (seated at right), Augustine and Elisa (standing in the background).

tection lies in the scales," he added.

Last week, a member of the public surrendered a pangolin weighing 12kg to the department, and it has since been released into the forest.

Currently, Sandakan-born Elisa is conducting research on pangolins at the Danau Girang Field Centre in Kinabatangan.

The UMS graduate, who holds a Master's degree in Ecological Process, is pursuing her PhD in Biosciences - Organisms and Environment at the Cardiff University, United Kingdom.



The pangolin that was surrendered to SWD last week.