

Connection with nature vital: Hawaiian scientist

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KOTA KINABALU: Having connection with the natural world is important, because without it, people won't recognise what the value is until it's gone, according to Senior Scientist and Cultural Advisor at The Nature Conservancy of Hawaii Dr Sam 'Ohu Gon.

Gon, who has 40 years of experience in Hawaiian ecology, including biological inventories and research, among others, was invited to Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) as part of the American Corner Sabah programme at the UMS library, on Tuesday.

Donning a *kihei* or a type of cloak worn over his shirt, Gon presented a close to one-hour talk titled 'Balancing economic development and environment conservation through a community-based approach' before an audience comprising UMS students from various faculties.

The *kihei* is part of the Hawaiian rectangular garment with patterns worn on formal occasions.

"This is my first time to Malaysia and I think Sabah is a beautiful place," said Gon who in 2014 was named a "Living Treasure"—one of the highest honours the Hawaii community can bestow upon an individual.

"On the first day of my arrival to Sabah, I went to the Weston Wetlands and saw proboscis monkeys and the synchronised fireflies going out at night, it was just beautiful to see.

"It is a world wonder, it is a wonderful thing, you see videos on YouTube and you think 'oh that would be a nice place to go and see' and I have to say that being there in person was far better than any video that's ever been made of that spectacular sight.

"Especially when the fireflies started to fly off the mangroves and come into the boat and just started to fly all around the people that were in there

"It was gorgeous to see, it really brought home to me how many unique things are to be found in Malaysia and certainly this is one of the centres of world biological diversity, a really impor-



Rukiah (right) presenting a souvenir to Gon (left) before presenting her the Kukui Nut Lei he wore around his neck .

tant place for conservation work.

"Of course everywhere in the world there are increasing pressures of human population that offer challenges to conservation of those species.

"I am hoping that what I had to offer is something that might be used by you in order to increase the amount of participation by communities in conservation efforts," he said.

He said Sabah has plenty of islands and many people saying "the kind of connections that you have to forge with plants and animals and ecosystems that you have here certainly is a matter of awareness."

"If people don't know what you have then they can't care about it, if you know what you have and if you are proud of what you have then you can get entirely communities involved in conservation

"In fact with your rules and regulations at the government level, people can feedback on those and say 'this is insufficient' and you need to make stronger laws or adjust the regulations so that its more to the benefit of biological diversity which we all depend on for many things.

"I think that rule is true everywhere in the world.

"I was also able to meet those from

Pacos, the community indigenous culture and the like, I think connection between the people and the place and the resources of that place is an important one to make sure that doesn't go away.

"It only takes a generation of people ignoring those kinds of connections for it to completely disappear.

"If you have no connection with the natural world, then you don't recognise what the value is until it's gone, and it's far too late then," he said.

Also present was UMS Head Librarian Dg Rukiah Ag Amit who presented a souvenir to Gon and in an impromptu gesture from Gon received a *Kukui Nut Lei* (Candlenut) necklace.

"*Kukui* is a symbol of enlightenment and I think it is really important to have someone like a librarian receive a layer of *Kukui* because of the enlightenment that she represents," said Gon.

Meanwhile, Rukiah explained that the American Corner is UMS Memorandum of Understanding with the US embassy signed in Sept 23, last year.

She said every month they should have at least two programmes organised under the American Corner, adding that it was the first time they invited a speaker from Hawaii to give a talk under the programme.

Earlier in PENAMPANG, the Introduction of outside flora and fauna from outside have caused many endemic species on the island of Hawaii to be extinct, said Dr Sam 'Ohu Gon, a native Senior Scientist and Cultural Advisor at The Nature Conservancy of Hawaii.

Giving a public lecture and sharing at Pacos Trust office, here, he also demonstrated that the preservation of native cultures and languages are intertwined with the conservation of the environment. Dr Sam demonstrated native Hawaiian chants and then explained the meaning in English. He has 40 years and a long list of scientific subjects such as entomology to his name.

The talks were courtesy of the US embassy from Kuala Lumpur.