



Dr Hiroshi and his masterpiece model elephant skeleton. Inset: Prof Charles.

World's one and only display at UMS

DE 9-3-2017 1
Kan Yaw Chong

KOTA KINABALU: The world's one and only actual pygmy elephant model skeleton can be found only at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah's (UMS) Institute of Tropical Biology and Conservation.

Elephant Tagas died and was buried in Lok Kawi Zoo in 2011.

The man who expertly pieced its scattered bones together starting June 2016 to the exact size and posture of the original elephant is rare Japanese master palaeontologist, Dr Hiroshi Sawamura, Curator of Ashora, Museum of Paleontology, Obihiro, Hokkaido.

Wednesday morning, Dr Hiroshi gave UMS students an hour-long talk on how he came to Sabah three times between June 2016 right up to March 7, 2017 to piece together the skeletal puzzle which was launched straight afterwards by Deputy Vice Chancellor, Prof. Kamarudin Mudin, on behalf of Vice Chancellor Prof. Datuk Dr Mohd Harun Abdullah.

He said two unique characters of Bornean pygmy elephant is a distinctive rise at the centre of its backbone and a very long tail reaching almost the ground.

But everything about Project Tagas started with an idea from Prof. Dr Charles Santhanaraju Vairappan, Director of the Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation (ITBC) back in 2015.

"We have this Bornensis Exhibition Gallery for Environmental Education but what we were lacking was an exhibit of the biggest mammal in Sabah," Prof. Charles told Daily Express.

"So I floated the idea to former Director of Sabah Wildlife De-

partment Datuk Dr Laurentius Ambu in 2015. He agreed with the idea and told me there's an elephant buried in 2011 at the Lok Kawi Zoo, so we went and excavated it, brought it back to UMS but it was quite a puzzle to put it together, the parts and pieces were everywhere, too much for us to do by ourselves," Prof. Charles related. Clearly UMS needed help.

"In fact, I asked people in London, then US, then Europe and all said 'we have no experts' but finally someone in UK suggested somebody in Hokkaido and since I have contacts in Japan who finally found out Dr Hiroshi," Prof. Charles plotted the globe spanning hunt for this rare expertise and pinned him down.

"Dr Hiroshi came in three phases, Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) helped us and it's a collaboration between the Sabah Wildlife Department, UMS and JICA that we finally got it done and put it up as a permanent exhibit for environmental education and conservation.

"In fact, it's not just putting the bones together, you need to put back the exact size and get the posture right, it's a bit complicated and tricky but he was very good and very fast because this guy has been doing it for years," Prof Charles said.

"Everything is real except the tusks (wood) and some small parts of the tail and toes," he said.

"He is even able to restore the hanging bones that control the in and out movements of the tongue, a very unique bone that you don't find in other elephant exhibits in London and his work is hat meticulous," he pointed out.

See Page 2, Col. 3