

IV. RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

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Forest fires in Kalimantan: who is responsible? — For several weeks in August 2002, the atmosphere in many parts of Malaysia was polluted with haze originating from ‘forest fires’ in Kalimantan and Sumatra. The fingers of accusation have been pointed at the usual suspects.

The Indonesian Government blamed ‘shifting cultivators’. The NGOs blamed the oil palm and logging industries.

During one of my visits to South and West Kalimantan a few years ago, I found that, in the peat areas of South Kalimantan, all the areas of logged ramin forest were being occupied by settlers from other parts of Indonesia as soon as the logging was over. The settlers would occupy and parcel out the land among themselves. Then they would cut and burn the remaining trees and plant pineapple on the peat. Every year, in the dry season, they would set fire to the peat and burn off the top layer. After 5 to 10 years, depending on the thickness of the peat, they would reach the mineral soil at the bottom, which would then be suitable for planting rice, bananas and fruit trees. At this rate, we can expect peat fires every year until all the peat is burnt off, and the carbon added to the atmosphere. That should take about 10 years.

In the inland areas, the situation is different. All along the roads in the interior, I saw small dwellings, each with an adjacent small home garden of bananas and tapioca, shrouded in smoke from the burning of surrounding secondary vegetation. Each settler occupied land far in excess of what his family could farm. The excess would revert to forest if left alone. To maintain 'ownership' the settler had to burn the secondary woody vegetation every year, in the dry season. Eventually, the whole area will become a fire-climax grassland of *Imperata cylindrica*, as has already happened in vast areas between Banjarmasin and Pulau Laut. Why are the settlers clearing so much land? I am told they are hoping to 'sell' their land to others for a good 'compensation'.

For their own reasons, the Government and the NGOs do not want to admit the truth. The establishment and enforcement of land ownership laws is long overdue, but the Government seems to lack the will. As for those NGOs who have been most vocal, I do not think they want to save forests or reduce greenhouse gases. They just want the opportunity to bash the logging and plantation industries. — F.S.P. Ng

Plants of Mount Kinabalu. 4 — Dr. J.H. Beaman is busily slogging away on part II of the Kinabalu dicots at Kew and has good hopes that he will have it ready in 2004.

Tree flora of Sabah and Sarawak — Volume 4 was published this year. It contains treatments of 24 genera, 321 spp (45 new); Aquifoliaceae (S. Andrews), Ebenaceae (F.S.P. Ng), Lecythidaceae (M.A. Pinard), Oleaceae (R. Kiew, 8 new spp), Proteaceae (R.C.K. Chung), Sapotaceae (P.P.K. Chai & P.C. Yii, 1 new comb by W. Vink); dedication to T.C. Whitmore, portr.; indices to scientific and vernacular names.

Manuscripts of the following families: Apocynaceae, Bombacaceae, Dipterocarpaceae, Escalloniaceae, Magnoliaceae, Meliaceae, Symplocaceae, Thymelaeaceae, and Tiliaceae are currently being prepared/edited for publication in Vol. 5 (targeted date of publication December 2003).

For the next five years, beginning May 2002, the project is fully funded by the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment of Malaysia and the Malaysian Board of Forestry Research and Development. To ensure that the project runs smoothly, a Memorandum of Understanding for 2002–2006 was signed by the Forest Research Institute Malaysia, Sabah Forestry Department and Sarawak Forestry Department at Semenggoh, Kuching, Sarawak, on 19 August 2002.

The project is planning to conduct botanical expeditions to Ulu Padas, Sabah (2002) and Usun Apau, Sarawak (2003).