Rainforest friends

The Mescot project aims to help the indigenous people of Sabah generate a sustainable livelihood while helping to preserve the forest and its treasures. **Rizauddin Ibrahim** finds there's so much to see and do on this ecotourism adventure

An Egret taking to the sky

*A patch of remaining **Silvinia Molesta**, the water plant that once engulfed Tungog Lake*

PHOTOS BY RIZAUDDIN IBRAHIM

*A boat trip along the **Kinabatangan River** is the best way to see wildlife in the area*

TO the Orang Sungei, or indigenous people who live along the Kinabatangan River in Sabah, the river and the forest are important life-lines. They are sources from which to gather food, medicine and products of trade.

Aware of the necessity to preserve these valuable resources, the Orang Sungei community of Batu Puteh started the Mescot initiative in 1996.

Mescot, an acronym for Model of Environment Sustainable Community Tourism, is a project designed to protect the remaining rainforest and the indigenous people's cultural heritage, while at the same time creating an alternative method to generate income for the indigenous people.

One of the methods is through the Batu Puteh Village ecotourism and homestay programme, which is also the home base of Mescot.

Eager to experience this ecotourism programme for myself, I take a flight to Sandakan with four friends.

*The TREC lodging is **low impact and eco-friendly***

*The entrance to **Tungog Rainforest Eco Camp***

*The main **Observation Platform** where visitors can relax and enjoy the view*

THE ALMOST-CHOKED LAKE

Batu Puteh Village is a two-hour drive from Sandakan airport and the Mescot jungle camp, the Tungog Rainforest Eco Camp (TREC), is just 15 minutes away from the village by boat. TREC is inside the rainforest, by Tungog Lake, one of many ox-bow lakes found along the Kinabatangan River.

The waters of Tungog Lake have only just been rescued from a type of water plant, the Salvinia Molesta, which nearly overwhelmed it. The water plant invaded the lake after massive floods in 2001. Within a short period of 16 months, it had completely covered the lake, choking the critical wetlands of the lake.

The Mescot team had almost completely removed the plants, but it is a continuous battle as the plants grow back easily, very fast, doubling in size every three days. I could see some patches of Salvinia Molesta on the lake's surface.

BACK TO BASIC

The camp itself is low impact, offering eco-friendly lodgings, with minimal disturbance to the forest. The structure comprises a common area with dining halls and three-tier terrace platforms — Observation Decks — constructed right over the lake's edge.

The accommodation units are 10 basic elevated huts called Live-in Observation Platforms that can accommodate two people, and which are basic but clean. To minimise the carbon footprint, there is no generator for electricity. Instead, car batteries are used to power a series of small LED lights to illuminate the camp at night.

The simplicity of the camp's facilities enhances a visitor's experience of the sights, sounds and smells of the Borneo Rainforest.

We're pleasantly surprised to find ourselves settling in so easily, attuned to the environment which comes alive with the sounds of the rainforest's denizens.

WILDLIFE DISCOVERY

Manning the camp are three cheerful staff. One of them is our guide who excels in explaining about the birds, squirrels, lizards and other small animals. With his help, we are even able to closely observe a pygmy squirrel and a bird with bright feathers, the Red-napped Trogon; they seem oblivious to human presence in their midst.

Around our camp we catch sight of some of the many creatures that live in the forests of the Kinabatangan floodplain, an area with the largest concentration of wildlife in the Southeast Asian region. Seeing wildlife is our main agenda. A trip up the river at dawn or dusk is the best opportunity to see them and this is included in our Mescot itinerary.

On our river expeditions, the Proboscis monkeys and long-tail macaques are common sights in this forest. There are also monitor lizards, otters and squirrels.

The Kinabatangan Forest teems with birds too. Perched high on the trees of the riverbank, or flying overhead, are hornbills of various species. We are lucky to chance upon the Wrinkle Hornbill, Oriental Pipe Hornbill and Black Hornbill.

On the river level, there are wader and water birds. We also easily spot egrets, herons, Oriental Darters and the Stock-billed kingfisher.

Other birds are the Serpent eagle, Red and black Broadbill and Storm stork.

Not content with our river trip, we go for a night walk in the forest adjacent to the camp. We come across a fish owl and interesting creepy crawlies like the whip scorpion, centipedes, lantern bug and tree frogs.

We also spot sleeping birds like the White-rump Sharma and the Black-backed Kingfisher. But the climax of our night walk is when we spot a leopard cat, which according to the camp staff, is the first sighting in the camp area.

GIVING BACK TO NATURE

But the best part about participating in the Mescot eco tourism programme is that we actually get to take part in conservation efforts in restoring the Kinabatangan Forest. After our morning wildlife observation river cruise, we take a boat ride to the replanting plot. Armed with machetes, we clear the grass and weeds around the newly planted saplings.

On another day, we cruise to another side of Tungog Lake, and plant 24 saplings in a new plot. Although what we do is only a small contribution compared to the more than 100,000 trees already planted under the Mescot initiative, we feel a sense of achievement.

When we go for walks, we wound our way past tall trees along the jungle trail. We hope the saplings we planted will, in the future, become part of a new prime forest.

traveltimes@nstp.com.my

*Checking for **nocturnal creepy crawlies** during the jungle walk at night near the camp area*

Visitors are cleaning the sapling from grass and weeds

Sandakan's other attractions

SEPILOK'S RAINFOREST DISCOVERY CENTRE

Botanists or anyone interested in plants will find the Rainforest Discovery Centre run by the Sabah Forestry Department fascinating. The main highlights of this attraction within the Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve are the Rainforest Exhibition Hall, canopy walkway and Plant Discovery Garden. There are also networks of trails into the rainforest.

Its Rainforest Exhibition Hall offers a quick lesson on the different types of forests in Sabah, its unique plants, and the animals they support.

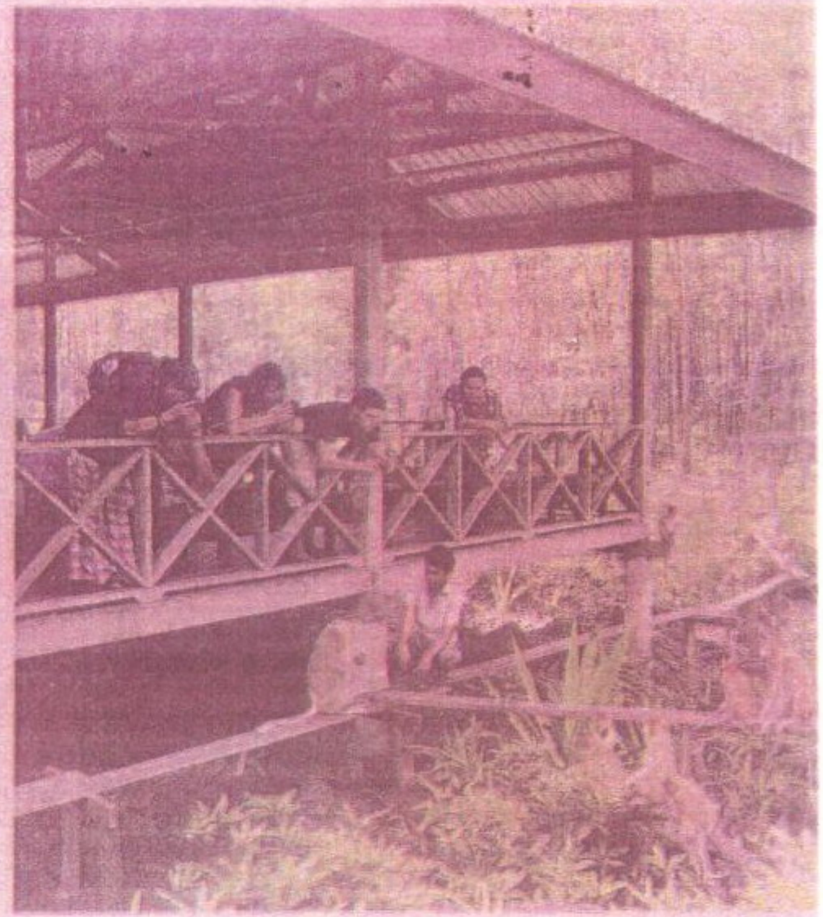
At the Plant Discovery Garden, plants are divided into various sections ranging from commercial plants like rubber and palm trees, to medicinal plants like misai kucing and tongkat ali.

There are also a collection of orchids, pitcher plants, heliconias and keladi. But the plant that really catches my attention is the Kelumpang Sarawak or wild almond tree that bears clusters of striking red fruit on its bark.

There is also a 150 metre-long canopy walkway, which at 25 metres above ground, give unparalleled views of the forest. On this walkway, visitors can see the tallest of rainforest trees, with the sounds of birds and insects completing the rainforest experience.

I am delighted when an eagle suddenly swoops down from a nearby treetop and whooshes past my head.

Naturally, I wish to see a variety of animals in this rainforest, but it is extremely hard to spot a large animal.

I also see a Prevost's squirrel during my walk along the forest trail. There are also a flying lizard, horn spider and crab spider.

→ READ MORE ABOUT THE CENTRE'S ORANG UTAN CONSERVATION PROGRAMME ON PAGE 4