Introduction

On the 8th May 2008, at Kota Kinabalu, Yang Amat Berbahagia, Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah, wife of the Right Honourable Prime Minister, in her capacity as, Chairperson, Malaysian Landscape Advisory Panel, conducted a brainstorming meeting, to introduce the proposed “Malaysian Rainforest Flora & Fauna Festival 2009”.

This meeting was attended by, amongst others: the Right Honourable Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Panglima Musa Haji Aman, Director-General of the Landscape Department and officers, the Director of Forestry Sabah, members of the Landscape Advisory Panel, Sabah Tourism officers and other officials of the State Government.

In this inaugural meeting, the proposed festival’s concept was discussed which will then be presented to the Federal Cabinet for approval including its financing.

In the discussions, it was unanimously decided that the maiden festival be held in Sabah because of its rich biodiversity and specifically the Rainforest Discovery Centre (RDC) as the launching place.
Site Visit To The RDC By The Right Honourable Prime Minister, Dato’ Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi & Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah

As a follow up to the first meeting of the committee on the proposed festival, a site visit to the launching site (RDC) was conducted by the Prime Minister and Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah, on 1st June, 2008. This was after an aerial-tour of the Danum Valley Conservation Area and the Danum Valley Field Centre by helicopter by the Prime Minister and his wife. During the aerial survey, the Chief Minister and the Director of Forestry, accompanied the dignitaries. The site-visit to the RDC covered amongst other things:

• a briefing given by the Director of Forestry on the suitability of the RDC as the launching site and the compelling reasons thereof;
• a press conference by Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah, on the proposed festival and its objectives ;
• a light lunch followed by a tour of the facilities available at site and discussions on the proposed extension and expansion of infrastructure and supporting physical requirements, to meet the objectives of the festival.

Objectives Of The Festival

These are:

• to showcase Malaysia’s natural landscapes and its flora and fauna;
• to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of natural landscapes and rainforest conservation;
• to promote Malaysia as an important destination for nature-based tourism;
• to ensure biodiversity and natural landscapes are conserved and preserved; and
• to project Malaysia’s leadership role in tropical and rainforest conservation.

The overriding theme is: Natural Landscapes and Conservation.
The Right Honourable Prime Minister and Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah’s visit to the RDC

- Buggy ride to the site
- Walking to the site with the Chief Minister of Sabah, Datuk Seri Panglima Musa Haji Aman (right)
- Dr. Robert Ong giving a briefing
- With the Sepilok Junior Rangers
- Admiring Kalumpang Sarawak fruit (*Sterculia megistophylla*)
- Having a closer look at the fruit
- Sharing a light moment
The Essentials Of The Festival

These include:
• rare species exhibitions;
• rainforest products displays – eg. rattan, bamboo, nibung, jungle food etc;
• traditional medicine and herbs showcase;
• a rainforest house; and
• demonstration of good forest governance.

The Compelling Case For Sabah & The RDC At Sandakan

In order for the festival to be successful, it must meet certain minimum criterion, the most important of which are:
• rainforests are in close proximity to the “show village”;
• there is evidence of biological diversity;
• the availability of suitable and reliable infrastructure;
• a place where it is conducive to plan, execute and monitor;
• the availability of supporting human resources; and
• there is sufficient space.
The RDC at Sandakan meets all these criterion and its advantages, cover, amongst others:
• a natural setting that is a continuum of dryland dipterocarp forest extending to the mangroves;
• is sited in lowland tropical rainforests, the crucible of the greatest biodiversity on earth;
• nearby to the world famous Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre at Sepilok;
• the RDC being a living museum;
• next to Sabah’s centre of excellence on forest management, the Forest Research Centre (FRC) at Sepilok;
• the FRC holding over 250,000 herbarium specimens, one of the largest in South East Asia.
• the networking quality of the RDC to: Kabili-Sepilok Virgin Jungle Reserve, the FRC, Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre and the Mangrove Discovery Centre Sepilok Laut; and
• Sandakan’s central locality in relation to Sabah’s environmental crown jewels (Danum Valley, Deramakot, Maliau Basin, the Lower Kinabatangan, the Ramsar Site, etc.)

During the visit of the Prime Minister and wife, it was decided that the RDC was indeed the best place to hold the festival and the follow on activities are to facilitate the planning, and execution within an 18-month schedule, or the end of 2009 for the launching, to coincide with the fruiting season.

Further discussions at the Prime Minister's official residence at Putrajaya followed on the 8th July 2008 and this was chaired by Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah. This meeting was attended by the Director, Datuk Sam Mannan and he was accompanied by Mr. Fred Kugan, Deputy-Director (Forest Sector Planning).

As a follow up, Tan Sri Samsudin Osman, President and CEO of Putrajaya and the Deputy Chairman, Malaysian Landscape Advisory Panel, made a site visit to the RDC on 9th August 2008, to familiarize himself with the site.

Similarly, Tan Sri Samsudin Osman was agreeable to choosing RDC as the launch site.

**Improvements At The RDC In Preparation For The Festival**
The existing facilities at the RDC need to be upgraded and extended in anticipation of the international event. Essentially, the most important considerations are:
• the extension of the RDC canopy walkway;
• the development of the RDC Reception Centre/Theatre/Restaurant Complex;
• expansion of the carpark;
• upgrading of the Mangrove Discovery Centre at Sepilok Laut;
• construction of a rainforest village and development of a rainforest garden and arboretum
• acquisition of nearby alienated lands to avoid development in the forested area of the RDC;
• upgrading of the FRC
• upgrading of the Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre; and
• jungle trails, toilets at strategic locations etc.

The landscape and infrastructure of Sandakan Town itself also requires improvement that needs to be planned for. The budget planned for the festival is RM80 million (approximately), of which, RM30 million are for improvements at the RDC and Sepilok and RM10 million for Sandakan’s landscape and improved infrastructure. The rest is for marketing, ceremonies, secretarial services, guests and suchlike.
Conservation & Good Forest Governance: The Unequivocal Need For Political Support & Political Will In Order For It To Succeed

The proposed festival being planned for, is the brainchild of Datin Seri Jeanne Abdullah, wife of the Prime Minister. In his support for the festival, the Prime Minister is once more re-affirming his passionate commitment for good environmental practices and conservation in the country.

This visit of 1st June 2008, is the Prime Minister’s 3rd visit to the Forestry Department in 3 years and Datin Seri Jeanne’s 2nd visit to the department, the 1st one being 10th August, 2007, when the Prime Minister launched the RDC. Such an honour is rarely bestowed upon any department in this country. Similarly, it is also rare indeed to have a husband and wife team at the highest level of government, who together display unrelenting support for conservation.

The Forestry Department considers itself deeply and lavishly honoured for being chosen as the host agency to launch the inaugural festival, a historical milestone for rainforest conservation in the world.

The pre-requisites for its success, as the Director of Forestry mentioned in his briefing to the Prime Minister, are:

- it is well thought through;
- it is well planned;
- it is well executed; and
- it is well done

The Forestry Department excitedly took up the festival as a deserving challenge.