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Food sites for elephants in forests

Foraging grounds in Tabin steer jumbos away from nearby plantations

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KOTA KINABALU: A fresh approach is being undertaken to grow elephants' favourite food plants in forest reserves, aimed at stopping them from encroaching into plantations.

Bringing Back Our Rare Animals (Bora) executive director Datuk John Payne said a site in Tabin had been identified as food grounds for the elephants.

The concept, he said, was to create specific small sites with the elephants' favourite food plants in the forests so that they would not wander into neighbouring plantations to forage.

"The idea is that once elephants get used to these feeding grounds within the forest, over time, they will become less and less interested in wandering into plantations and smallholdings," he said in an interview.

He said Bora - formerly known as Borneo Rhino Alliance - had formed new partnerships with the state government, non-governmental groups as well as oil palm growers to help the Borneo pygmy elephants in the long term with the creation of



Group outing: A herd of wild Borneo pygmy elephants grazing close to a plantation in Sabah's east coast. — Pix courtesy of Bora

these feeding grounds.

"With movement control restrictions over the past 17 months, Bora has found it impossible to travel regularly to our work sites outside of Tabin Wildlife Reserve.

"With the blessings of the Sabah Forestry Department and the Wildlife Department, in April 2021,

we identified a perfect site in Tabin for food grounds," said Payne.

He said the area, which measured about 22ha, is now covered with weed and sparse trees, and is accessible by road.

"With staff and workers of a nearby oil palm grower, we are enriching the site with elephant

food plants. The favourite food includes a variety of grasses and native wild fig trees," he said.

Unlike oil palm and smallholder crops, he said the food plant species would grow back again after the elephants had fed on them, adding that work started in earnest in August this year.

Bora anticipates the site can feed about 60 elephants a month.

"No herbicides are being used. We are also putting in a salt lick which attracts wildlife because there is not enough sodium in the leaves of plants in humid tropical zones," he said.

Payne said Bora was determined to focus on programmes that involve active intervention to address the causes of wildlife problems, rather than simply reacting to symptoms.

"We are seeking partners to try out a variety of wildlife programmes. We have engaged with several oil palm growers with estates in the Kinabatangan district," he said.

Bora's new partners now include WWF-Malaysia-Unilever on orangutan food plants in estates in Kinabatangan, 1StopBorneo and Respect (Responsible Elephant Conservation Trust), a new group that will develop a similar elephant feeding ground near Telupid.

Bora's video "Planting Pastures for Endangered Wildlife" is a finalist for Climate Governance Malaysia's inaugural Hornbill Award 2021 and will be presented during the Grand Finale at Climate Week New York.