



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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Vanishing Healers: Safeguarding Malaysia's Endangered Medicinal Plants

World Wildlife Day, observed annually on 3rd March, reminds us that biodiversity and human well-being are inseparable. This year's theme, "Medicinal and Aromatic Plants: Conserving Health, Heritage and Livelihoods," underscores the vital role wild plant species play in sustaining healthcare, cultural traditions and economic security.

In conjunction with this occasion, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) highlights a pressing yet often overlooked environmental crisis in Malaysia, the rapid decline of endangered medicinal plants. While wildlife conservation frequently dominates headlines, the silent disappearance of medicinal flora deserves equal attention.

Across the world, medicinal and aromatic plants form the backbone of traditional knowledge systems and primary healthcare. Millions depend on plant-based remedies for prevention and treatment, while global industries rely on these species for pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, food products and wellness goods.

Malaysia, one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, is blessed with tropical rainforests harbouring thousands of plant species with therapeutic value. For generations, local communities and traditional healers have relied on these plants to treat ailments, promote well-being and preserve cultural heritage.

Many aromatic plants remain common in Malaysian home gardens. Among them are pandan (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*), lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*), turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), kaffir lime (*Citrus hystrix*), ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), torch ginger (*Etilingera elatior*) and mint. These plants remain integral to culinary traditions and household remedies.

Yet beyond these cultivated species, several important medicinal plants face serious conservation threats. *Eurycoma longifolia*, commonly known as *Tongkat Ali*, is widely marketed for boosting energy and male vitality. Strong domestic and international demand has led to extensive harvesting from the wild. Due to the species slow growth, natural populations are vulnerable to depletion. Although listed as "Least Concern" globally by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), it faces increasing pressure locally, prompting conservation measures and restrictions on wild harvesting.

Aquilaria malaccensis, the source of agarwood or *gaharu*, has been severely depleted by illegal logging and overexploitation. Its resin is highly prized for medicinal, aromatic and religious uses, particularly in Middle Eastern and East Asian markets. Despite international trade controls, enforcement challenges continue to undermine protection efforts.

Labisia pumila, known locally as *Kacip Fatimah* and traditionally used for women's reproductive health, is becoming scarce in the wild. Harvesters often uproot the entire plant to obtain its medicinally

valuable parts, leaving little opportunity for regeneration. Without systematic cultivation and replanting programmes, its long-term survival in natural habitats is uncertain.

Similarly, *Coscinium fenestratum*, or Yellow Vine, traditionally used to treat fever, infections and diabetes, is threatened by destructive harvesting of its stems. Natural regeneration is slow, and conservation efforts remain limited.

The causes of this decline are largely human-driven: deforestation for agriculture and infrastructure development, excessive harvesting to meet commercial demand, weak enforcement of conservation laws, climate change, invasive species, limited public awareness and greed.

The loss of medicinal plants is not merely an environmental issue; it is also cultural and economic. Traditional Malay, Orang Asli and Orang Asal healing practices depend heavily on forest biodiversity. When these species vanish, centuries of accumulated knowledge disappear with them. Rural communities that rely on sustainable harvesting for supplementary income also stand to lose vital livelihoods.

Medicinal plant conservation is not only about protecting valuable natural resources but also about safeguarding human health, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. The threats faced by these plants are complex and multifaceted, requiring a holistic approach that involves governments, communities, researchers, and the broader public. By promoting sustainable harvesting practices, supporting ethical trade, and preserving traditional knowledge, we can ensure that future generations can continue to benefit from nature's healing treasures while preserving the delicate balance of our ecosystems.

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