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Towering heritage

The Malaysian cengal is one of the plants to be featured in an exhibition which opens in Paris next year.

By **HILARY CHIEW**
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NATHALIE Frossard strikes one as a typical Western backpacker traversing the globe with a carefree attitude. She embarked on a solo trip to China when she was 18 and has since been infected by the travel bug. Working to save up enough money for the next trip seems to be the driving force in her life.

The intrepid French traveller has visited almost every continent (except the icy Arctic and Antarctic) and has made repeat visits to South-East Asia as this is her

favourite region in the world.

But unlike the usual adventure-seekers, the native Parisian's trips to many developing countries have exposed her to the intricate relationship between nature and human.

"I realised that people in developing countries, especially the rural communities, live in appreciation of nature compared to us in the so-called developed West. Take the French for example. Many of us are coffee-drinkers but we hardly know where coffee beans come from or how the plant looks like. We have lost that attachment to nature as our society progressed," says Frossard.



Standing tall: The country's oldest cengal tree is found in Hulu Dungun. The tropical hardwood tree is said to be depleting in the wild.



Pride and joy: Nathalie Frossard holding a piece of wood carving made from the hardwood cengal.

That revelation stayed with her for years and she often thought about how she could contribute to nature preservation notwithstanding her lack of botanical knowledge and scientific backing.

The inspiration came in the winter of 2006. She woke up in the middle of the night and wrote the proposal that gave birth to the Plant and Planet project. Two weeks later, she set up the non-profit organisation and began sourcing for funding. The project aims to show the importance of plants in human societies through an exhibition scheduled for summer 2010 in Paris.

"I want to draw my audience to the different aspects of human dependence and therefore, cultural links to plants since time immemorial," she explains, adding that some of these relationships have been exploitative in nature with one party suffering to the point of extinction.

A threatened plant species is picked to represent each of the five inhabited continents – Asia, Africa, America, Europe and Oceania – to illustrate her points.

The former sporting products marketing executive sought the advice of botanists and conservation groups and did her own research to find the representative plants. Given that there are millions of plant species, picking one for each continent was a tough job.

A grant of €15,000 (RM72,600) from the Environment Ministry last year set her on her way to seek out the first species – Palo santos (*Bursera graveolens*) in Peru in September.

The resin from the tree that grows in the dry forests of north Peru was once used by the Incas for purification and to ward off evil spirits, misfortune and calamity. She visited shamans and interviewed incense wood harvesters, users and even the Environment Minister during the month-long field trip.

In early 2008, during a trip to Sulawesi, Indonesia, a young Malaysian woman told her about cengal (*Neobalanocarpus heimii*), a magnificent tree that is highly threatened. She decided then that it would be the Asian representative.

"Before I came to know about cengal, there were suggestions of sandalwood and a flower native to China. I rejected sandalwood because it's similar to Palo santo and the flower in China didn't seem right to me," she recalls.

Further research before she came over to Malaysia to document the use, threats and the place of cengal in society convinced her that cengal best represent dipterocarp trees that are exploited for the timber used for construction of houses, railway sleepers and fishing boats.

"I learnt that it is a very slow-

growing hardwood species and that adds to its vulnerability. It is the only timber species where the allowable felling diameter is 60cm while other species is 50cm. To grow to 60cm, it will take between 50 and 80 years. That's really slow," she says after returning from a two-week field trip to Kelantan and Terengganu recently.

While there, Frossard visited the famous boat-making centre in Pulau Duyung, cengal wood-carvers in Besut and sawmills that are still processing cengal.

In Pulau Duyung, she learnt that the once world-renowned cottage industry now has only three boat-makers compared with 40 during its heyday. The art is dying as wood supply dwindles. The wood-carvers also face a dire future both from a shortage of supplies and a lack of interest in the art form among the younger generation.

At the sawmill of a main dealer in cengal, there were only a few pieces of the priced logs, which fetch as much as RM10,000 per tonne.

"Until as recent as five years ago, the sawmiller claimed that the warehouse was filled with cengal. When I related that to the Malaysian Timber Industry Board which recommended the visits to the sawmills, the officers were shocked. It's a Malaysian heritage that should not disappear. It's a shame that it is so threatened," she says.

What would have been the highlight of her trip was spoiled by a landslide brought on by rains. The route to the 65m-tall oldest cengal tree in Hulu Dungun was cut off.

"I am so disappointed. I really would like to touch and feel it. The only cengal tree that I saw was the one in the dipterocarp arboretum in the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia in Kepong," laments Frossard who likened the cengal wood to a "living organism" as it changes colour as it ages.

She has decided on the European and African choices and is on the lookout for the Oceania candidate. She will head to the French Alps in June to document Arnica, a herbaceous plant used since medieval time for its medicinal properties.

As she dwells deeper into the issue of development versus nature conservation, she concludes that the solution to the deteriorating state of the environment lies with the destroyers.

"Man is the problem and also the solution. My exhibition hopes to relay this key message."

The exhibition will be shown in several French cities but with additional funding, Frossard hopes to take it around the world.

■ To follow the progress of Plant and Planet, go to www.planteetplanete.org