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No longer just herb collectors

By CHARLES FERNANDEZ

A GROUP from the Jakun community of Kg Gumum, Tasik Chini in Pahang has improved its economic position through value-chain upgrading activities at a herbal processing facility.

This was made possible by Tongkat Ali herbal pill manufacturers Biotropics Malaysia Berhad (Biotropics) in Shah Alam, which helped set up the herbal processing facility to enable the group to make the leap from merely collecting wild herbs in the jungle to engaging in more value-adding activities.

The value-adding activities include drying, grinding, packaging and transporting the herbs. The facility is fully operated by a family in the community.

In the case of Tongkat Ali roots, an orang asli would typically spend the whole day in the forest searching for the root, which he can sell at an average price of RM2 to RM3 a kilogram.

However, if the roots are subjected to simple pre-processing activities such as sun drying, grinding and milling, their market value multiplies more than fourfold.



You've earned it!: Abu Seman (second from right) and a family member (right) receiving a mock cheque for the first delivery of ground and sieved Tongkat Ali root from Gruenwald as Tengku Shahrir (left) holds a bag of the herb.

“We believe that with a little support, the orang asli themselves can undertake these simple higher-level activities that will move the product up the value chain and earn them a more decent income,” Biotropics strategy and supply chain management director Tengku Shahrir Tengku Adnan said.

For Biotropics, this recent initiative with the Jakun community is not a one-off financial charitable contribution and more than a CSR project; it is an ongoing commitment.

Tengku Shahrir said that, through this arrangement, the company was strengthening its commitment to developing the orang asli community by providing them an opportunity to generate extra income and developing their competency within the community.

Biotropics chief scientific officer Dr Joerg Gruenwald revealed that with some financial support, loan of machinery and training on material processing, keeping simple accounts, cost control and project management, the model family had constructed and started operating a simple processing facility within six weeks.

"The product will be marketed in the United States, where we have a large following for Tongkat Ali herbal pills," Gruenwald added.

The family, headed by Abu Seman, had produced its first batch of 50kg of sieved and ground Tongkat Ali root in March.

And, on May 15, the group achieved a new milestone with the delivery of its first commercial one-tonne supply to the Biotropics extraction facility in Shah Alam.

"Through this opportunity, we have demonstrated that we, too, have a vision and are capable of meeting set targets," Abu Seman said.

During a simple ceremony to mark the achievement, Abu Seman received a mock cheque for RM15,000 for the commercial one tonne supply to Biotropics.

According to Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Hood Salleh of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), who has worked with the various orang asli communities, Abu Seman's family was recommended to Biotropics as they had the business acumen and the right attitude for the programme.

Hood said the choice of the family should not create any adverse social impact in the community as they were seen to be working closely with the others.

He said Abu Seman had worked in projects with various non-government organisations (NGOs) and was therefore seen as the ideal person with whom Biotropics should start the venture.

"Ideally, similar ventures could be extended to other orang asli communities if this pilot project proves to be successful," Hood said.

The venture has indeed proven Abu Seman's ability to handle issues such as working with other collectors, hiring workers, keeping an eye on costs, and scheduling the activities of processing.

And, it was achieved with little formal business training. The family has demonstrated how their own forest knowledge and a modern commercial business activity can be brought together to improve their lives.