

Dr. Reza Azmi



Dr Reza Azmi, was born in Kuala Lumpur but spent most of his formative years in the UK. It was here that he graduated with a degree in environmental sciences from the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Reza's connection with the Kinabatangan began early in his career as a volunteer with WWF Malaysia. The project looked at the relationship and use of forest resources by local communities living along the Kinabatangan river. This was the start of a 5-year fascination with the

Kinabatangan – the floodplain forests, the history of the people and also the changing economic influences on the region.

One of the publications from this period "The Natural Vegetation of the Kinabatangan Floodplains" (1998) remains one of the key references for the region. One group of plants typical of the floodplain forests, obscure as it is, became the subject of his doctoral thesis (A Taxonomic Revision of *Ceriscoides* (Rubiaceae) in South East Asia). The other rarity unearthed in the Kinabatangan was a new species of Begonia. Together with a world expert of this beautiful group of plants, a new species *Begonia lazat* was described for the first time. The name "lazat" (delicious or tasty in Malay) was used as local people often used the leaves for cooking. It has a lemony taste to it.

One of the other early projects that Reza has worked on has been the website, www.wildasia.net, an internet portal on natural areas in Asia. Developed in 1998, the site currently draws in over 6,000 visitors per day and has been voted Best Tourism Publisher by Tourism Malaysia two years in a row (2004 & 2005). Since 2004, Reza has also been instrumental in conceptualizing Wild Asia's Responsible Tourism Initiative – an initiative to promote sustainable tourism in destinations by working with tourism operators and engaging travelers. The initiative was highlighted by APEC in 2006 as one of the "Best practices in Sustainable Tourism".

By 2003, Reza went on to start a pioneering conservation effort, Wild Asia and this has developed to be a significant force in promoting the conservation of natural areas. Unlike other conservation groups, Wild Asia directly engages the private sector that has a significant impact on our natural world. By working to educate businesses huge progress can be achieved to alleviate pressure on our natural world. It is of no surprise that the two core areas of work for Wild Asia are highly relevant to the Kinabatangan - engaging responsible oil palm plantation companies and promoting responsible tourism. These are the two major economic factors in the Kinabatangan and companies can have a positive role to play if they are helped along the right path. Getting it wrong is what we fear the most given the richness and beauty of the Kinabatangan.

Reza continues to be close to the Kinabatangan. He was part of the production team of the internationally acclaimed BBC Planet Earth documentary series. This assignment took Reza back to the Kinabatangan for several months to be part of the filming of the natural history of Gomantong Caves. More recently, he returned to the Kinabatangan as a judge for Tourism Malaysia's annual awards. There will be more trips ahead as there is a pilot project looking at natural corridors being planned for the Kinabatangan. Reza hopes that this would be a return of sorts – as a way to bring back the learning's gained since those early days of floodplain exploration in the Kinabatangan.

As a tribute to Dr. Reza's contribution in conservation, Sukau Rainforest Lodge dedicates room No. 8 to him.