

Extra care: Participants gathering at the flag-off point before the start of the race to dip their shoes in a disinfectant to minimise the risk of bringing foreign microorganisms into the frogs' habitat.



Hopping with enthusiasm

Crowd-puller Bornean Frog Race helps sell state as destination for nature-based tourism

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KUCHING: The second annual Bornean Frog Race, jointly organised by Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas), Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation (IBEC) and Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC), concluded on a high at Kubah National Park last Sunday.

Being the final event of a week-long celebration called "Kubah Week", which involved several nature-based activities, the race was the much anticipated highlight that saw excited participants taking part in a race to find the most number of frog species within a two-hour time frame.

The participants raced up Mount Serapi to look for frogs. At the natural frog pond, bursts of excited chatter could be heard intermittently whenever someone found a beautiful tree frog. A flurry of shutter clicks then followed as people gathered around to take photographs, being careful not to harm or alarm the creature.

Many children also took part in the event, the youngest being only six years old. It was a terrific way to spend the night, mingling with other nature lovers and taking part in a worthy cause — to raise public awareness about the threats faced by frogs.

Modelled after the well-known Bird Race, which takes place at Borneo Highlands each year, the Bornean Frog Race is the brainchild of Unimas research students Pui Yong Min and Ong Jia Jet.

Both were present and busy as bees during the race, overseeing the running of the event and making sure every programme was carried out without a hitch. On hand to pro-



In danger: This Harlequin tree frog is one of several species threatened by diseases and habitat loss in the wild.

vide support were several volunteers from Unimas and SFC.

Ong, when contacted by *The Star*, said that they were extremely encouraged by the public response to the event.

"We were ecstatic to see such a huge crowd turn up for the Frog Race this year. Not only did we managed to attract more students and naturalists, we also received overwhelming response from the general public."

Ong said that the idea to have an annual Frog Race was thought up after they noticed how successful the yearly Bird Race organised by Malaysian Nature Society and Borneo Highlands Resort was in raising awareness about the plight of birds.

However, the duo faced many challenges, especially due to a lack of funds and limited time.

"We are only students and as students, we have many other responsibilities such as getting our research done and working on our thesis. This event sapped a lot of our energy and time.

"We had been working on it for about a year and promoting it whenever we could donate some of our time away from being students," said an exhausted Ong who, along with many other volunteers, stayed up well into the wee hours of the morning on the day of the event.

However, their hard work and dedication clearly paid off.

The number of people that turned up for the event was beyond their

expectations. Sometimes it got a bit overwhelming but the volunteers made sure everything ran smoothly.

The Frog Race attracted people from all walks of life, many were first-timers and had not attended last year's event, which only had about 40 participants. This year, the number soared to beyond a hundred, which was actually the participant-limit capped by the organisers.

One enthusiastic participant came all the way from India.

Abhijit Das, 30, flew here from northeast India just to take part in the event. Attached to the Arranyak wildlife research organisation, Das was in the city for three days.

He was extremely impressed with the execution of the event and praised the organisers and volunteers made up of Unimas students and SFC staff for doing an excellent job.

"I heard about this event from other researchers and am very glad I came here. It is my first visit to the Sunda region and I can't wait to return for a much longer visit," said Das.

"It was a pleasure to meet other enthusiastic researchers and scientists and I will definitely be taking part in next year's event as well."

Participants competed for prizes in three categories — most aesthetic photo, rarest species and most number of species photographed.

Philip Chen (*pic*), 22, a photographer and graphic designer from here emerged the winner in the best photo category with a stunning photograph of a White-Lipped frog.

Being a first-time participant, he was extremely happy to be the winner as it was totally unexpected.

"I found out about the event from friends in a photography group. I am really glad I took part because I had a lot of fun. I really hope that the event helps to let people know that Borneo has a lot of natural beauty," Chen said.

He also praised the organisers for running the event smoothly.

"Everything was done well and I will definitely be back next year. I will also tell my friends to take part in the event."

Stamp collectors will also be pleased to know that a new stamp was officially announced at the event.

Bearing the image of a *Racophorus penanorum*, a species of frog found in Gunung Mulu, the stamp is available by contacting Prof Dr Indraneil Das, a herpetologist from Unimas by email at idas@ibec.unimas.my

For the future, Ong said the organising committee had proposed that the Bornean Frog Race be included in the Sarawak Tourism Calendar as an annual event. They are also looking for more sponsors as the event is a great platform to get noticed.

He also thanked all their sponsors this year who helped make the race a great success.

"We wish to thank Shell for sponsoring this event under the grant 'Shell Chair for Environmental Studies' and Plaza Merdeka for generously giving us space in their mall for promotion and publicity purposes.

"We are also most grateful to Datuk Chan Chew Lun, the managing director of Natural History Publications, who donated most of the prizes and Dr Ulmar Grafe, a famous herpetologist from University of Brunei, for donating his time to support our event," said Ong.

Events like the Bornean Frog Race help put Sarawak on the world map as a prime destination for nature-based tourism.

And with the wonderful success of this year's race, Sarawak now has another nature event the state can be proud of.

