

Commercialise East Malaysia's unique produce

Food agriculture in Malaysia took a backseat after the 1970s as focus shifted to manufacturing, electronics and heavy industries, like steel and car manufacturing, and later, the IT industry with the establishment of Cyberjaya and the Multimedia Super Corridor.

In the last decade, the Department of Statistics found a trade deficit in food products, where imports exceeded exports by RM186.8 billion. Malaysia exported RM33.8 billion in food last year, but imported RM55.5 billion.

The trend of becoming more dependent on food imports is worrying. The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent possible breakdown of the global supply chain raised the spectre of food supply disruption from our usual trading partners, particularly China and Australia.

Given the huge importance and value of the food and agricultural sector, it is time that we make food agriculture a critical and sustainable sector. One way of doing so is to shift our focus to new or untapped produce which are unique.

East Malaysia for instance, has many unique food produce. One of it is tarap, a delicious, rare fruit found in the wild. This seasonal fruit has a soft shell that can be peeled apart with bare hands and inside are fleshy seeds that look like a bunch of grapes.

Since the fruit oxidises fast, it must be consumed quickly once it is opened. It is a favourite in East Malaysia that is yet to be discovered by most of the rest of the world. Like durian, once commercialised, it could be highly valuable.

Another famous produce in East Malaysia is dabai, an exotic fruit which turns black when ripe. This seasonal fruit is shaped like an olive, only larger, with edible skin and yellowish white flesh which tastes creamy.

Locals prefer to boil the fruit to soften it, while some soak it in salt water or eat with soy sauce.

There is also Bario rice, which is Sarawak's finest rice grain. It was once so highly valued that the locals used it as a currency for trade.

But today, the Bario region in Sarawak is losing its youth to the cities, and there are fewer farmers of the famous highland rice. The rice is so rare that you can usually only find it vacuum-packed next to the expensive Japanese rice in supermarkets.

The Ranau district in Sabah is a good example of a fertile land and a population that is very interested in farming. Unfortunately, because of its remoteness, many good local produce do not get to the rest of the country where the demand might be.

This is one thing that businesses can fix as we bring the produce from Ranau to higher-value markets elsewhere in Malaysia. We should also develop Ranau, also known as the Switzerland of Malaysia, as one of the many agricultural centres in Malaysia.

While there's quite a lot of produce to discover in Sabah and Sarawak, we need to look into bringing them to the rest of the world and commercialising them. These local, tasty and nutritious fruits can be much better alternatives compared with imported apples and oranges.

While gardening is not for everyone, getting your hands dirty in your garden is a great way of reconnecting with nature. This is also a good way to get youngsters back to nature, and make it part of our lives in a more acceptable way of sustainable living.

This could be a start, especially as rejuvenating agriculture may address unemployment in the country, estimated to be 800,000 people due to the pandemic and loss of jobs.

Farmers are an aging demographic, as such we need to change the mindset of the younger generation that agriculture can be a lucrative living.

Adopting modern techniques and technologies in food agriculture would make the process a lot easier, cost effective and sustainable in the long run.

Smart farming is the future of agriculture, where product tracing and transparency are becoming more important to consumers of today, who want to know where their food comes from and how it was produced.

With a growing population and diminishing agriculture land, we urgently need to invest in technology, training as well as research for higher productivity and developing sustainable farming systems for the long run.

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