PRESS RELEASE FROM BORA (www.bringingbackourrareanimals.org) – 14 FEBRUARY 2022

GOVERNMENT AND NGO'S JOIN HANDS FOR MALAYSIA'S OTHER ENDANGERED WILDLIFE ICON

The seladang is Peninsular Malaysia's wild cattle species, second only to the Malayan tiger in being our most endangered large animal. A century ago, seladang occurred in river valleys throughout Peninsular Malaysia. Krau Wildlife Reserve in Pahang was established in 1923 to conserve this majestic species. The area was chosen because seladang were abundant there. In 1938, they were so common that the manager of the Tekal oil palm estate some 7 kilometres from the Reserve, set up electric fencing to keep the seladang out of the estate. Today, there are no wild seladang in or anywhere near to Krau. There is a small captive herd, however, at Jenderak Selatan Wildlife Conservation Centre on the edge of Krau Wildlife Reserve, managed by the Department of Wildlife and National Parks.

"Total wild seladang numbers are estimated to be in the very low hundreds, scattered in the north of the Peninsula in several small herds that cannot meet to interbreed," said Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN) Director-General Dato' Abdul Kadir bin Abu Hashim, "The century-long decline was a result of the usual factors: habitat loss and poaching". The excuse of hunters that the seladang is just a wild cow probably contributed to its demise. But it is not just a cow – it was a part of our natural heritage before wild cattle were domesticated. Now, there is concern that the remaining small herds may simply drift to extinction. Without timely intervention, Malaysia risks losing its largest native wildlife species after the Asian elephant, during the lifetime of our children. But what should the interventions be?

The Government, protected area managers and conservation organisations are joining hands to initiate a programme named Conservation of Seladang in the Royal Belum State Park and adjacent forest areas. Through study and monitoring, the two-year project, which started in November 2021, aims to contribute to ensuring the long-term viability of the seladang in Malaysia.

“Royal Belum State Park totally supports this initiative,” said Mohamed Shah Redza Hussein, Director of the Perak State Parks Corporation, “It is well observed that the population of wild seladang is in the decline and that there are not many herds in existence now. We know that Royal Belum and adjacent forest areas contain a few small herds. That has been documented over more than a decade now. But we need to know more on factors limiting their numbers and use of the habitat, so we can take targeted steps to sustain and perhaps boost the numbers. Conducting this programme in a State Park will be efficient from a logistics and staff resource aspect, and for continuity of the programme, as there is a management authority in the landscape that can assist on the ground in the long term. However, wildlife management is not the State Parks main expertise. Fortunately, with this collaborative effort and expert support from partners to collect data and do the analytics, we can hopefully help to provide a way forward to better conserve the seladang”.

The core methods to be used include camera trapping to investigate the demography of the population, mapping and investigating the sites used most-frequently by seladang, and use of DNA in the dung to assess if they are inbred. The work will be co-funded by a grant from the National Conservation Trust Fund for Natural Resources (NCTF) which is administered by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (KeTSA). The proposal for the project was put together by Sabah-based non-governmental organisation, Borneo Rhino Alliance, or BORA, which has recently rebranded as “Bringing Back Our Rare Animals”. BORA programme director Dr Zainal Zahari Zainuddin, who led work to apply assisted reproductive technology to the Sumatran rhino in Malaysia, said “the seladang situation is worryingly similar to that of the Sumatran rhino, which in the end went extinct not because of the previous impacts of habitat loss and poaching, but because small, inbred clusters of the animals could not meet to breed, and female reproductive pathology occurred. In addition, poor nutrition in wildlife that is confined to limited optimum habitat will contribute to low birth rate and high neonatal mortality. Over several generations, birth rate may drop below death rate, even in the absence of poaching.”

There are numerous camera trap images of seladang in Hulu Perak and survey reports from as long ago as 2007. This means that there is a unique before-and-now dataset.

WWF-Malaysia has most of these images and is a key collaborator in this partnership. PERHILITAN will analyse the seladang dung from the point of view of how related they all are.

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NOTE TO EDITOR:

BORA is providing this text as a partner of the Perak State Parks Corporation, Department of Wildlife and National Parks (PERHILITAN) and WWF-Malaysia in initiating investigation of the seladang in Hulu Perak.

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