

# RAFFLESIA HUNTING

>> *Rafflesia are parasitic, rare, and cannot be artificially cultivated*

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**O** **THER** than breaking a very long journey, the group was also very keen to see the famous Rafflesia flower. The Rafflesia is well-known to be the largest flower on the planet, found mainly in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. It is the official state flower of Sabah.



Breathtaking view of the mountains on the way to the Biosphere Reserve.

## ► THE PLANT

Rafflesia are parasitic, rare, and cannot be artificially cultivated. Approximately 28 species have been described so far, with 18 species believed to occur in Malaysia. The



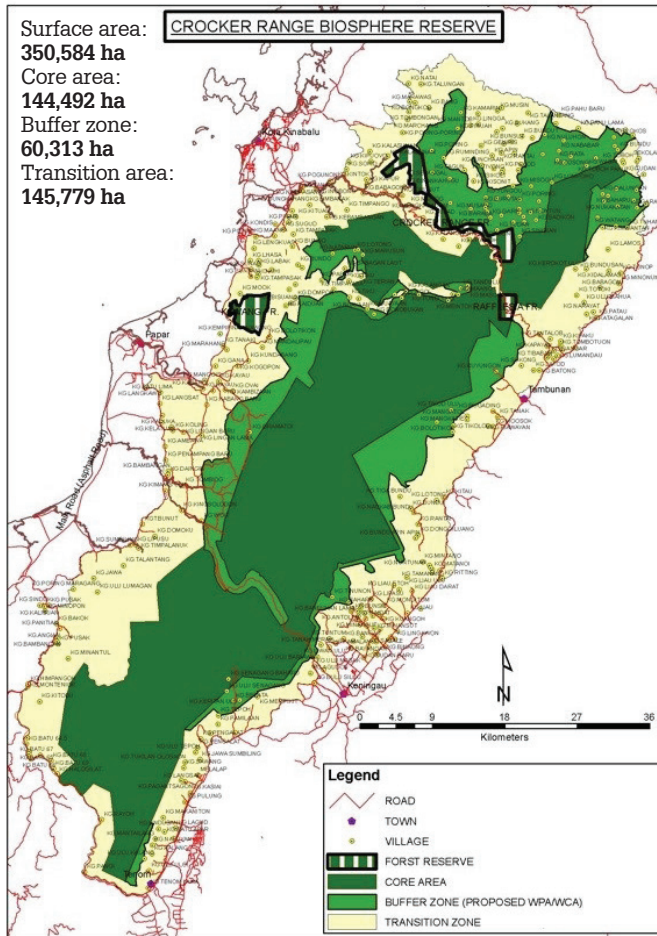
A Rafflesia in full bloom.

smallest ones measure several centimetres while the largest are over a metre across. In Peninsular Malaysia, local orang asli communities call them bungapakma and use several species for traditional medicine. However, this species is protected by law in Sabah and collection is prohibited.

The Rafflesia buds take months to bloom, and they only last for less than a week. The flowers smell like rotting flesh, attracting flies which are its main pollinating agents. After about five days, the flowers will start to wither and die. The decomposing plants are eaten by rats and other small animals, helping to distribute the seeds.

Rafflesia seeds will only grow on the roots and vines of lianas (*Tetrastigma* sp.) a hanging vine often seen in rainforests. Once germinated, the plant grows a cabbage-like bud which expands over time. The whole plant only consists of roots and the flower bud; there are no leaves or stems.





A wild berry found near Gunung Alab.



One of the colourful moths found at the Reserve.

## ► THE PARK

Only 13 km away from Keningau town, the Crocker Range Park is the largest park in Sabah, sprawled over eight districts. Established in 1984, the Park is 15 km wide and 75 km long, covering 139,919 hectares. The highest peak is Mount Alab at 2,050 m. It is an important water catchment area that feeds five major rivers that flow to the western coast.

Beyond the Park, the Crocker Range Biosphere Reserve (CRBR) forms the largest protected land area in Malaysia, covering an estimated 350,584 hectares of mixed tropical dipterocarp rainforests and montane landscapes and - home to a rich diversity of rare endemic species of flora and fauna, such as the mountain barbet, golden-naped Barbet, beetles and two Rafflesia. It is divided into zones; with a core area, buffer zone and transition area.

UNESCO has designated Sabah's Crocker Range as a World Biosphere Reserve in 2014 and it is now part of the Man and Biosphere (MAB) programme at the Jonkoping University in Sweden. The MAB is an intergovernmental scientific programme that aims to establish a scientific basis for the improvement of relationships between people and their environments.

Crocker Range Park offers a Nature Centre, insectarium, fern garden and a Rafflesia plot. It is one of the less visited centres, hosting only 12,000 visitors per year; but it is an excellent venue for a quiet nature retreat



## ENVIRONMENT

or team-building exercises.

It was a great stop, for the park is located high up in the mountains, where temperatures pleasantly hover between 18-26°C. The dormitories had comfortable beds and clean facilities, managed by Manis-manis Resort and offered at a very reasonable rate.

Dinner was catered at Cinnamon Restaurant, a beautiful wooden open plan building with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountainside. The lights of Keningau town could be clearly seen from the restaurant.

As a bonus for nature photographers and insect enthusiasts, the lighted park buildings attract a diverse and beautiful host of moths, cicadas and other insects especially at night. For budding naturalists, the species names can be found at the insectarium; if there is a specimen on display.

Many butterflies and birds can be seen during the day. You could also cross paths with other wildlife as you walk around the area.

### ► THROUGH THE TRAIL

After a good night's rest and a satisfying breakfast, the group took on the Crocker Trail. It is a relatively easy 2.036 km trail which takes just over an hour to complete at a brisk pace. However, the pack of scientists took a lot longer to complete the walk, because they were often intrigued by many of the tropical plants and stopped to record them on camera.

The group had opted to start the walk from the primary forest side, ending at the nature centre. The path was a bit uphill in the beginning, but went mostly downhill after the halfway point. The trail is well maintained and marked, so visitors do not need a guide to accompany them. There are steps and handrails, as well as several huts along the way.

Among the notable plants that grow along the trail are the prehistoric tree ferns, several species of yam, rattans, giant bamboos and figs. They did not come across any wildlife, but there was some proof of their presence in the area.



Flowers from a type of yam found on the trail

Nearer the end of the trail was the Rafflesia plot. The flowers are monitored, so one can call ahead to ask if there are any blooms before coming to visit. This group was very fortunate to find some *R. arnoldii* buds and a newly bloomed flower. It must have opened the previous night because it was really nice and fresh. Everyone was enthralled by the red and white beauty. Unfortunately, one bud was found broken by irresponsible visitors. Perhaps they were too impatient to see the interior of the tightly closed bud. It was heart-breaking to see it broken before it had the chance to bloom.

The group then continued their journey through the fern garden, insectarium and the Nature Exhibition Centre. The Exhibition Centre is a great place to start, or end, the Crocker trail adventure as it offers information on all the parks in Sabah and the biodiversity within.

The group adjourned at noon, extremely pleased with their good fortune.

As they were leaving, another bus arrived with students from a nearby college. It was heartening to see Malaysians taking time to enjoy the amazing natural heritage in our backyard. – **Global Environment Centre**



Visitors from the International Mire Conservation Group (IMCG) on the Crocker Trail.



Sunset along the mountain road towards Kota Kinabalu.