



The life of independent smallholders

A typical day for an independent oil palm smallholder is, inevitably, different from that of those working on large corporate plantations. They manage their own oil palm farms and are completely self-reliant. Their work can be difficult, especially when there are major infestations to deal with and substantial problems to solve.

Now, smallholders have also come under the spotlight to increase their yield and comply with standards such as the Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) certification, which were previously only required of corporate plantations.

These are not easy targets but with the right support, this independent and resourceful players will be able to meet the challenges ahead. Their resilience is well illustrated by two oil palm smallholdings in Perak that are, in many ways, similar to those of their peers but with a marked difference in the way they operate.

DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

Chong used to drive a tractor for a living. When he retired three years ago, he started an oil palm farm in his hometown of Sungai Kroh. As a smallholder, Chong sells his fresh fruit bunches to an independent dealer, who then sells them to an independent mill.

Chong does not have a fixed schedule or a to-do list but he visits his farm, which is just behind his house, every day to feed his dogs and inspect his trees. Harvesting takes place every 20 days or so and this is done by contractors sent by the dealer.

Most planters with oil palm farms have a wait-and-see attitude when suggestions or recommendations are made with regard to improving their crop. But Chong has an inquisitive mind and is open to trying new ideas and suggestions offered by external parties.

He makes his own organic fertiliser and discusses problems and possible solutions with a team from Wild Asia, a social enterprise. Over the past seven years, Wild Asia has researched, field-tested and established a sustainability programme aimed at supporting small oil palm farmers by helping them improve their farming practices and addressing their challenges.

After hearing about beneficial plants that prevent bagworm, an oil palm leaf-eating pest, Chong decided to grow these plants on a small patch of land reserved as his experimental plot.

Bagworm is a dominant pest for oil palm and has caused large losses in the industry since 1956. Its larvae eat oil palm foliage and use the lower part of the leaf for resting and moulting. A bagworm infestation dries the fronds and if left untreated, young oil palm trees can die. Older trees take a long time to recover and productivity is definitely affected. Studies have found that severe bagworm defoliation can cause a 33% to 47% reduction in yields.

To address bagworm infestations, smallholders are asked to take preventive measures, such as monitoring their trees for this pest and alerting the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) if it is identified. MPOB may use an aerial or ground sprayer and/or install natural bagworm pheromone traps to treat the infested trees.

Chemical application can quickly address the problem, although it presents the risk of polluting the environment. Injecting insecticide into the trunk of an infested oil palm tree is another option but this increases the bagworm's resistance to the chemical and significantly disrupts the population of its natural enemies.

MPOB and Wild Asia have recommended the planting of beneficial plants that attract parasitoids, a natural predator of bagworm and other leaf-eating



SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE



pests. These plants are an effective, environmentally friendly and sustainable solution for bagworm. Chong has since planted these flowering plants around his farm and the results speak for themselves — even though the neighbouring oil palm farms are infested with bagworm, his trees are doing well.

Last year, Chong's farm met the Roundtable of Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) certification standard for sustainable palm oil. Now, he shares his experiences and practices with other farmers who are warming up to new ideas and practices.

"Some smallholders didn't believe that planting a flowering plant would help with bagworm. They were also sceptical about changing the way they do things. But Chong's farm proves that environmentally friendly practices can be beneficial. Now, his smallholding is a model farm for sustainable palm oil," says Sheila Senathirajah, Wild Asia's technical programme manager.

"Hopefully, when smallholders come to see us or maybe visit Chong's farm, the seed of what is possible will be planted and they will be willing to try something new."

WOMEN WHO FARM

When Dongkin Kaway, 78, retired from the army, he was given a piece of land in Kampung Chenderong Kelubi, an Orang Asli village. Now, his seven daughters manage his oil palm farm collectively. They built the roads on the farm and also plant, harvest and collect the fresh fruit bunches. The

sisters do everything manually. During replanting, they carry oil palm saplings in each hand and on their head, and during harvesting, wheelbarrows are used to carry fresh fruit bunches to the side of the road.

"We have different plots of land, quite close to each other. When there is a lot of work, say, planting or harvesting, to be done on one plot, we head there and help out. Our children are encouraged to pick up loose palm oil fruit when we harvest. They must start learning how to manage a farm from an early age so that they can always stand on their own two feet. This is the way of the Orang Asli," says one of Dongkin's daughters, known as Kak Long.

She learnt to manage her farm by observing and learning from the bigger plantations. Her husband also works for a plantation company and has indirectly influenced how she runs her farm. Many smallholders tend to learn in the same way and adopt desirable agricultural practices from corporate planters. However, at time, due to a lack of technical understanding, they carry out unsustainable methods.

"Smallholders may carry out undesirable practices, such as planting right up to the riparian. They are merely following practices seen elsewhere and lack the knowledge to understand why this may not be a good approach," says Sheila.

"In this case, it is very hard to explain that's not a desirable or sustainable act. So what we need to do is find alternatives and at the same time provide the education and support to ensure the sustainable practice is maintained over the long-term."

Kak Long and her sisters are proud of their oil palm farms and say they have kept the family together and made them "orang kuat". Their biggest challenge and expense is maintaining the road on their farms, which their dealer needs to collect their fresh fruit bunches. The land is too soft on some parts of their farms, which makes planting the trees and transporting the fresh fruit bunches more difficult and time-consuming.

Nevertheless, the Dongkin sisters are positive about their future and face their challenges with a sense of humour. They say the amount they make from selling their fresh fruit bunches is adequate but of more importance is the legacy that they will leave behind for their children. **E**



Top: The Dongkin sisters are positive about their future.

Bottom: Chong working on his oil palm farm and one of the beneficial plants that help keep bagworm infestation away.