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The chronicles of wild orchid conservation in Malaysia, a new strategy for rapid documentation, discovery, and stakeholder participation

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It is tempting to think that we have a picture-perfect understanding of the natural world, including its flora and fauna. However, reports from around the world remind us time and time again that we have only scratched the surface of discovery. Discovery is the crucial first step in plant conservation. Without describing a species, we cannot assess its conservation status or ensure its survival. Once a species is described, it has to be organised into meaningful classification systems, providing a basis for discussing plant diversity which forms the foundation of plant-related research efforts. Our more than 30 years of research in Malaysian forests have yielded a total of 20 plant species that are new to science and more than 100 new records of orchids. From 2016 to 2018, we carried out multiple botanical rescue missions in disturbed forests in Terengganu, focusing on saving epiphytic orchids and other epiphytes growing on cut trees in active logging sites. This proved to be a very effective strategy for evaluating species diversity. A total of 77 orchid species were reported as new records. They include nine rare, eight endemic, and four new species. These results suggest that many orchids might have gone extinct without ever being recorded due to a lack of awareness about the abundance of epiphytic orchids on fallen trees. In 2019, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Anap-Muput Forest Management Unit (AMFMU) started working together to rescue these orchids and other affected terrestrial, saxicolous and epiphytic plants within AMFMU in Sarawak. AMFMU constructed a dedicated shade house for these rescued plants. Through this short collaboration, we discovered one new orchid species and five new records. Therefore, we hope that more logging concessionaries will adopt our conservation strategy, contributing to the country's commitment towards achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that include conservation of biodiversity.

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