

## **Forest of knowledge: Exploring learning opportunities at the confluence of people and nature**

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The Rimba Ilmu Botanic Garden in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia has an unusual history and ethos. It is one of Malaysia's earliest postcolonial gardens, established in 1974 with the explicit intention of eschewing the European formal flower garden aesthetic in favour of a more 'tropical forest' one. Today, fifty years since its genesis, Rimba Ilmu has matured into a 'garden in a forest': approximately only one quarter is built up while the rest is a former colonial-era rubber plantation that has been left to self-regenerate into a secondary forest. In this presentation, I reflect on what the *raison d'être* and future of a small, postcolonial, tropical botanic garden could look like. I provide evidence from three key data sources: official documents, interviews with garden staff and partners, and a visual reading of the garden's landscape. My results indicate a rich, multi-layered history where a people-with-nature development of the garden over half a century has enabled unique learning opportunities—an '*in situ*' experience within an '*ex situ*' site. I will show how Rimba Ilmu is working to find pathways to sustainability, developing its edge and establishing a distinct ethos over the decades through innovative public engagement, vibrant volunteer programmes, and strategic and diverse partnerships, including interdisciplinary art-science collaborations. This research offers perspectives and routes to postcolonial conservation and education, rethinking people-and-nature in the city, and finding a niche for smaller gardens to complement yet distinguish themselves from larger, more established gardens.