

# AGARWOOD THEFT CONTINUES UNABATED

**Man discovers poachers rampantly chopping up trees on Penang island for its resin**

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from the felled karas trees. We chanced upon chainsaws, believed to have been used by the poachers," he told the *New Straits Times*.

According to authorities, agarwood cartels, whose members are mainly foreigners, had been harvesting the trees in forests throughout the country as early as the late 1980s, and smuggled them to neighbouring countries.

If this continues, there is a possibility that the trees will become extinct.

Gurdial said his most recent encounter with a cartel member was in Bukit Gambir on Tuesday last week, where he found fresh splinters from the felled trees.

He said he stumbled upon a man, believed to be Cambodian, who was putting agarwood, which is also known as gaharu, into plastic bags.

"I approached him but he ran off. However, he returned as he met a dead end. I warned him to not take the agarwood or I would hand him over to the police. He then left," he added.

Gurdial said he spotted splinters, which were believed to be from felled karas trees, in Island Glades the day after.

He said unless one wandered deep into the forests, they might not be aware of the poaching.

**P**OACHERS are at it again, going after karas trees, which produce the valuable agarwood, on Penang island.

In recent months, a significant amount of karas trees were found to have been chopped down in the forests of Bukit Gambir, Island Glades, Lembah Permai in Tanjung Bungah and Chin Farm in Batu Ferringhi.

The discovery was made by Penang Hash House Harriers veteran runner Gurdial Singh, 59, during his runs in the areas in the past two to three months.

"It (the theft of karas trees for its resin) is still occurring despite previous crackdowns. Nothing is stopping the poachers.

"During our runs, we discovered areas where the trees had been chopped down along with wood splinters, believed to be

"Due to the distance (between the main roads and the deeper parts of the forest), no one can hear the sounds of the chainsaws cutting down the trees. No one even knows when the trees are being taken out from the forests, or even how.

He said people only knew about the felled trees when they went for their runs in the area.

"Two to three months ago, we realised a significant amount of karas trees in Bukit Gambir, Lembah Permai and Chin Farm had been stripped naked."

Known as the "gaharu man", Gurdial has been a whistle-blower on the poachers' activities for years.

Gurdial noticed that a certain type of tree was being chopped on the island since 2010, but did not know then it was agarwood.

It was when he stumbled upon the felling near the Penang Botanic Gardens back in 2011 that he realised the value of the tree and why they were being chopped. Since then, he has been the eyes and ears of the authorities in fighting against the poachers.

Gurdial's tip-off in late 2012 had led to a crackdown and the arrest of two Cambodian men, along with the recovery of agarwood worth nearly RM200,000 by the state



**Penang Hash House Harriers veteran runner Gurdial Singh, who is also known as gaharu man, showing parts of a felled karas tree in George Town yesterday. PIC COURTESY OF GURDIAL SINGH**

Forestry Department.

The authorities found four camps, believed to have been set up by poachers, deep inside a forest near Mount Erskine.

The so-called "mini village" had a kitchen, a storage place and a workshop to process the agarwood.

A stockpile of food comprising some 10kg of rice, cooking oil, canned food and vegetables, which were enough to last several people for at least two weeks, were also found.

The oil from agarwood resin is highly prized in the Middle East and fetched up to RM20,000 per kg back in 2012. The price has soared since then.

This led to its moniker,

"liquid gold".

It is usually used as a base for perfumes due to its fresh and woody scent. It is also used as an ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine for various ailments.

The Forestry Department had planted over 2,000 karas trees at Teluk Bahang National Park between October and November 2013. Two of the state's Lions Clubs planted 450 of the trees in the forests on the island the following year.

However, due to poor maintenance, many of the trees died, said Gurdial.

Statistics showed the export of agarwood-related products is valued at RM15.16 million in 2016.