

SEKAR IMEJ CONSERVATION AREA



SICA PROJECT NEWSLETTER

VOL 10 2025

IN FOCUS

We are charging ahead with Sekar Imej Conservation Area (SICA) Scientific Expedition – Series 6 by shining a spotlight on snakes, creatures often feared by many but essential to healthy ecosystems. For millions of years, snakes have thrived quietly in their world; now, we step carefully into theirs.

Our dedicated rangers are at the heart of SICA’s work. In this special issue, we highlight their 10 key responsibilities, from protecting habitats to monitoring wildlife, revealing the full scope of their vital role. This edition also features interviews with one of our most passionate rangers and our newly inducted Conservation Lead, offering insights into life in the field and the shared journey of protecting SICA’s biodiversity.

SICA’s landscapes are alive with wildlife worth protecting. We showcase 10 species, ranging from Vulnerable to Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, reminding us why conservation matters.

To reflect on how far we have come, this issue includes SICA Chronicles, a concise timeline capturing key milestones from the past five years, alongside a roundup of conservation highlights from the last six months.

More than a newsletter, this edition is a celebration of teamwork, meaningful moments and milestones, capturing the essence of **“10 Voices for SICA and Nature”**.

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 TEN SEASONS IN SICA 

IN SUGUT'S GREEN EMBRACE WE STAND,
WHERE HILLS RISE STEEP, WHERE RIVERS LAND.
FROM GIBBONS' CALLS AT MORNING LIGHT,
TO CLOUDED LEOPARDS IN THE NIGHT.

TEN ISSUES TOLD, THROUGH FIVE BRIGHT YEARS,
OF HOPES AND WINS, OF TRIALS AND CHEERS.
THE TURTLE'S SHELL, THE LORIS' GAZE,
THE FOREST'S SONG IN ENDLESS PRAISE.

WITH RANGERS' WATCH AND VILLAGES NEAR,
THE PATH TO GUARD THIS PLACE IS CLEAR.
EACH PAGE WE'VE PENNED, EACH TALE WE'VE SPUN,
CARRIES THE PROMISES OF WORK BEGUN.

FROM LESSONS LEARNED TO PATHS AHEAD,
THESE STORIES BIND THE ROADS WE TREAD.
FOR SICA THRIVES WHEN VOICES UNITE,
WHEN SCIENCE AND COMMUNITY STAND SIDE BY SIDE.

SO, HERE'S TO TEN, AND SEASONS AHEAD,
TO FORESTS STANDING, RIVERS WIDESPREAD.

TO LIVES PROTECTED, BOTH GREAT AND SMALL,
AND SHARED RESOLVE TO ANSWER THE CALL.
TOGETHER WE GUARD WHAT TIME CANNOT RESTORE,
THE WILD, THE HOPE, THE FUTURE WE FIGHT FOR.

—WANJI

SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION SERIES 6: SNAKE

Reticulated
python



In healthy forests, snakes are not a sign of danger but a sign of balance. Often misunderstood and unfairly feared, snakes play a vital role in maintaining ecosystem stability by regulating populations of rodents and other small animals. Their ability to adapt, camouflage and survive in changing environments has allowed them to thrive for millions of years. Protecting snakes and their habitats is therefore not just about conserving a single species – it is about safeguarding the natural balance that supports forest regeneration and biodiversity.

To better understand snake populations in SICA, researchers from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) conducted a one-week field study from 19 to 24 September 2022. Surveys were carried out at seven key locations across SICA: Kibundu, Gerowong, Batu Dinding, Monjuk Peak, Laimong Peak, Tasik Harmoni and an adjacent oil palm plantation.

Methodology

Data collection involved visual encounter surveys, with teams of two to four researchers conducting observations during the day (8.30am to 12.00pm) and at night (8.00pm to 12.00am) using torches and headlamps.

This approach provided a comprehensive view of snake activity across different habitats and times, providing valuable insights for conservation and management.



Figure 1: The Bornean Gold-ringed Cat Snake (*Boiga dendrophila annectens*) is often found in vegetation along waterways where it hunts for prey like birds, small mammals and other reptiles.

© Photo & Caption: Evan S.H. Quah

Results Table

	Family	Species Name	Common name	Localities within SICA	IUCN Status
1	Pythonidae	<i>Malayopython reticulatus</i>	Reticulated Python	Oil Palm Area	Least Concerned
2	Pythonidae	<i>Python breitensteini</i>	Bornean Short Python	Main Camp Area	Least Concerned
3	Psammodynastidae	<i>Psammodynastes pictus</i>	Painted Mock Viper	Kibundu	Least Concerned
4	Elapidae	<i>Naja sumatrana</i>	Equatorial Spitting Cobra	Oil Palm Area	Least Concerned
5	Elapidae	<i>Ophiophagus bungarus</i>	Sunda King Cobra	Forest & Oil Palm Area	Not Evaluated
6	Viperidae	<i>Tropidolaemus subannulatus</i>	Borneo Keeled Pit Viper	Parcel 4	Least Concerned
7	Colubridae	<i>Boiga dendrophila annectens</i>	Bornean Gold-ringed Cat Snake	Tasik Harmoni	Least Concerned
8	Colubridae	<i>Calamaria hilleniusi</i>	Hillenius's Reed Snake	Monjuk Peak	Least Concerned
9	Colubridae	<i>Calamaria sp.</i>	Reed Snake	Kibundu	-
10	Colubridae	<i>Coelognathus flavolineatus</i>	Malayan Racer	Oil Palm Area	Least Concerned
11	Colubridae	<i>Dendrelaphis caudolineatus</i>	Striped Bronzeback	Monjuk Peak	Least Concerned
12	Colubridae	<i>Lycodon sealei</i>	Seale's Banded Wolf Snake	Main Camp Area	Not Evaluated
13	Colubridae	<i>Oligodon octolineatus</i>	Eight-lined Kukri Snake	Kibundu	Least Concerned
14	Colubridae	<i>Xenochrophis trianguligerus</i>	Triangle keelback	Kibundu	Least Concerned

Field Notes:

Some of the snakes featured in this issue were recorded through quick sightings or photographs during field surveys. As specimens were not collected in every case, a small number of identifications remain unconfirmed.

Results & Discussion

The results were encouraging: A total of 14 snake species were recorded at SICA, with the highest diversity observed in the Colubridae family (Results Table). These findings highlight the importance of even small patches of secondary or regrowth forest, which can serve as critical sanctuaries for biodiversity in landscapes modified by human activities, such as oil palm plantations.

However, much remains to be explored.

Several areas, including Bukit Garib and Sinalaan, were not accessible during this expedition, suggesting that additional species are likely present and await discovery. Repeated surveys across different months and seasons would provide a more comprehensive understanding, as some species are only active during specific times of the year.



Hillenius's Reed Snake



Figure 2: The Reticulated Python (*Malayopython reticulatus*) is the longest living snake in the world. Its colour pattern allows it to blend into the undergrowth where it waits to ambush its prey. © Photo & Caption: Evan S.H. Quah

Even with the limitations of a short-term, opportunistic study, the data collected are invaluable for guiding Wilmar's future management and conservation plans for SICA. They provide a strong foundation for ongoing efforts to protect and monitor herpetofauna (amphibians and reptiles), ensuring that this unique forest ecosystem continues to thrive. This diverse biotic signature demonstrates that, despite significant habitat conversion, the remaining forest patches around SICA are sufficient to sustain populations of forest-dependent reptiles.

A VISUAL JOURNEY

10 REMARKABLE SPECIES OF SICA

Pangolin (*Manis javanica*) – Critically Endangered

🐾 Fun Fact: Pangolins are the only mammals covered in protective scales that curl into a perfect ball when threatened.



Clouded Leopard (*Neofelis diardi*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: Clouded leopards are excellent climbers and can descend trees headfirst, like stealthy ninjas of the canopy!

Slow Loris (*Nycticebus menagensis*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: Slow lorises have a toxic bite, making them the only venomous primate in the world. Luckily, they mostly use it for self-defence, not for hunting.



Binturong (*Arctictis binturong*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: Binturongs smell like popcorn! Their scent-marking glands release a fragrance that some say has a deliciously buttery aroma.

Otter (*Aonyx cinerea*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: Otters are playful swimmers and often seen sliding down riverbanks. They even hold hands while sleeping to stay together, like a floating family chain.



Sambar Deer (*Cervus unicolor*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: Sambar deer are surprisingly good swimmers and often escape predators by diving into rivers or lakes.



Tarsier (*Cephalopachus bancanus*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: Tarsiers have enormous eyes — each one larger than their brain — perfectly adapted for spotting prey in low-light conditions.

Sun Bear (*Helarctos malayanus*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: The smallest of all bear species, sun bears have a long tongue that helps them slurp up honey from tree hollows.



North Borneo Gibbon (*Hylobates funereus*) – Endangered

🐾 Fun Fact: Gibbons are acrobatic singers of the forest. Their loud morning calls can carry over a kilometre, helping them mark territory and bond with mates.

Maroon Langur (*Presbytis rubicunda*) – Vulnerable

🐾 Fun Fact: These striking reddish monkeys are primarily leaf-eaters and can digest toxic plant compounds that would otherwise harm other animals.



Sustainability Insight Mr. James Wong

"I come from a background that blends environmental science, community engagement and project management. Over the years, I've worked across projects covering research, policy and on-the-ground implementation, all of which have given me a deeper and more holistic understanding of conservation challenges and solutions."

Q What sparked your passion for conservation work?

My passion was sparked by first-hand experiences of environmental degradation alongside the resilience of communities that depend on natural ecosystems. Seeing what's at stake – both for people and biodiversity – made conservation feel personal and urgent.



James and the giant Salo leaves

Q What is your role in driving conservation within the organisation?

My role mainly focuses on integrating conservation efforts into strategic planning, programme design and Wilmar's daily operations. I work to align environmental goals with our organisational priorities, ensuring that conservation is not a "nice-to-have" but a core value embedded in decision-making.

Q How do you empower your team or community to be part of conservation efforts?

I focus on education, inclusion and ownership for my team. By sharing knowledge, listening to local perspectives and giving people a clear role in solutions, conservation becomes a shared responsibility rather than a top-down directive.

Q Any advice for young professionals who want to work in conservation?

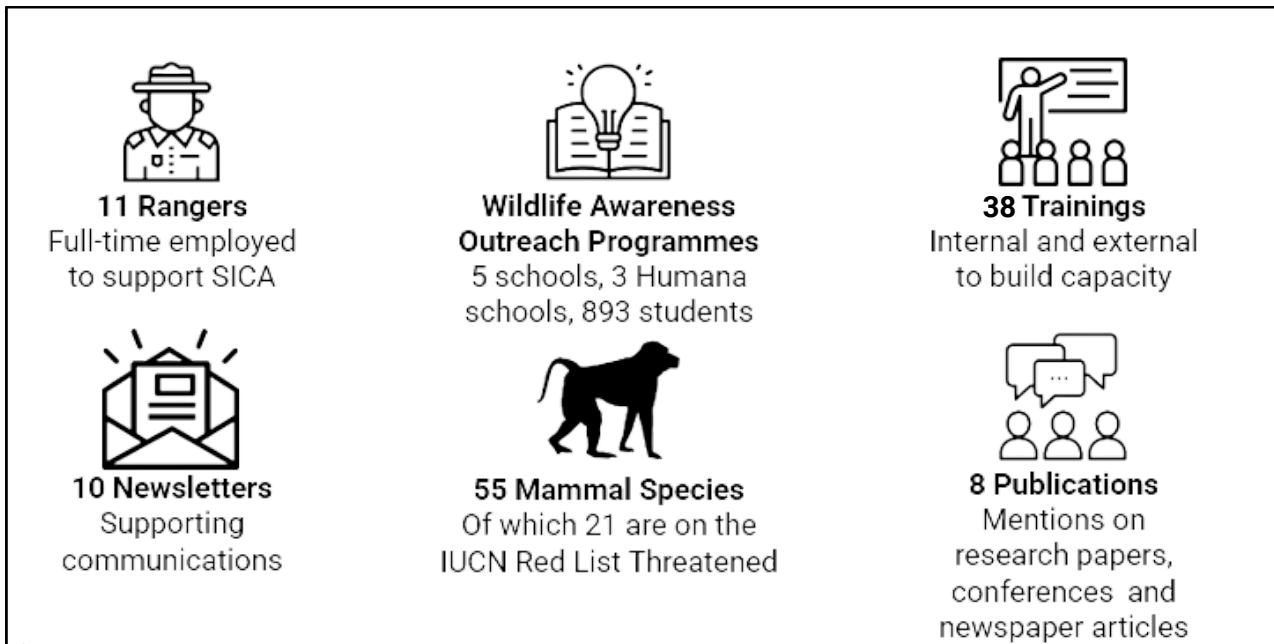
Stay curious, build interdisciplinary skills and don't underestimate the power of collaboration. Conservation work needs scientists, communicators, innovators and leaders alike – identify where your strengths lie and use them in the intersections with conservation to make an impact.

Protect what matters today so it can thrive tomorrow.



SICA Chronicles:

Half a Decade of Nature and Discovery



- Preliminary Other Effective area-based Conservation Measure (OECM) assessment
- Launch of the first SICA scientific expedition
- Memorandum of Understanding with South East Asia Rainforest Research Partnership

2021

- Creation of the SICA logo
- Establishment of seven trails in SICA



2022



2023

- OECM nomination submitted
- SICA Centre facilities completed
- SICA Nursery established

2024

- 3D community map with surrounding villages
- Kicked off the Seedling Buyback Programme
- 30 participants completed the Honorary Wildlife Warden training course by the Sabah Wildlife Department

2025

- SICA Nursery reached 7,316 trees in stock
- SICA Book Publication Initiated
- Initiation of MOU with UMS



RANGER ROUNDUP

TOP 10 ROLES

1. Patrolling the Conservation and High Conservation Value (HCV) areas

Rangers conduct regular patrols of conservation and HCV areas to prevent illegal activities such as poaching, logging, fishing, open burning or land encroachment. Patrols are conducted on vehicles and motorbikes to allow rangers to cover the terrain thoroughly.



2. Wildlife Monitoring

Rangers observe and record animal populations, behaviours and movements to support conservation research and species protection. They protect endangered or vulnerable species by monitoring nests, dens, or breeding sites and by maintaining 10 camera traps across SICA. These cameras are crucial tools in wildlife monitoring.

3. Tree Planting and Tagging

Rangers contribute to forest restoration by planting trees in the Conservation & Recreational Landscape Project and tagging trees under Wilmar's Remediation and Compensation Plan. This work supports both biodiversity and habitat recovery initiatives.



4. Data Collection and Reporting

Field observations, species sightings and ecological changes are carefully documented. Rangers compile this information into daily and weekly reports, providing critical data for management decisions and ongoing conservation planning.

5. Nursery Maintenance

Rangers care for seedlings in the SICA Nursery by watering, pruning and maintaining cleanliness to allow the seedlings to grow up healthy. They work to prevent overgrowth and ensure that the seedlings thrive for future planting initiatives.



6. Habitat and Infrastructure Maintenance

Rangers maintain trails, water sources and other critical habitats to support a healthy ecosystem. Their other duties include boundary demarcation, repainting boundary pegs, maintaining conservation signboards and managing basecamp facilities, including minor repairs and construction.



7. Enforcement (Honorary Wildlife Warden)

Our rangers enforce local environmental laws and regulations, conducting spot checks, reporting violations to relevant authorities and preventing encroachment into protected areas.

8. Community Engagement and Educational Outreach



Rangers work closely with local communities and school children to promote conservation awareness and sustainable practices. They actively support Wilmar's conservation programmes, such as the Wildlife Awareness Outreach Programme and Junior Ranger Programme, by cultivating a sense of stewardship and shared responsibility within local communities.

9. Supporting Research Projects

Rangers assist scientists and researchers with fieldwork, including setting up camera traps, tagging wildlife and collecting biological samples to support ecological studies.

Their involvement spans biodiversity assessments, forest regeneration studies and other ecological research. Rangers help researchers navigate the challenging terrain, while gaining valuable knowledge and hands-on experience in conservation science.



10. Emergency Response

In the event of wildlife emergencies, forest fires or natural disasters within the protected area, our rangers act swiftly to ensure both human safety and wildlife protection.

SICA STAR

LUKAS JASMIN

How long have you been working as a ranger and what do you enjoy most?

I have been a ranger for about three years. I first joined Wilmar in 2016 as a maintenance worker, and when the opportunity came up, I chose to become a ranger. I enjoy being in the forest – it feels calm, and I like working surrounded by nature.

What wildlife do you see the most and do you have a favourite?

I mostly see monkeys and birds during patrols. My favourites are sun bears and clouded leopards, which I usually spot through our camera traps. Even so, they are very special animals and it makes me happy knowing they are living and thriving in our forest.



How do you feel about conservation in our estates?

Overall, conservation in our estates is well managed. We have enough people to conduct patrols and look after the area, so things are under control. In the future, if we have more vehicles for patrol, it will make our work more efficient and help us cover the estate grounds better.

What challenges do you face as a ranger?

The weather can be unpredictable, especially during the monsoon seasons. Other challenges do crop up occasionally, but I tend to forget the unpleasant ones quickly. I just focus on doing the job and moving forward.

What skills or values do you think are most important for a ranger?

I think communication skills are important, especially basic English. Knowledge about animals, along with the ability to identify trees, is also very useful. I keep track of all the local names of plants and animals as best I can, but I still have a long way to go in learning their scientific names. Oh! And camera trap setup skills are very important too.

If you could choose one training for rangers, what would it be and why?

I would choose training on how to handle snakes because we do come across them quite often in the forest. Personally, I am fascinated by them. I love their colours, their slithery movement and how brave they are when facing danger.

Learning more about them would help us protect both ourselves and the animals better.

What does a typical day look like for you?

Most mornings start with patrolling. We check boundary pegs, look for signs of wildlife and protect the conservation area from illegal encroachments.

Some days we monitor camera traps or assist with community programmes – no two days are the same.



SICA PROJECT ACTIVITIES

On 10 June 2025, our Conservation Lead, Mr. James Wong, and Conservation Officer, Ms. Wanji Chua, visited the Faculty of Tropical Forestry at UMS to explore potential areas of mutual interest and strategic collaboration. During the visit, Wilmar invited UMS to collaborate on a forest regeneration experiment within SICA.



From 2 to 5 December 2025, the UMS team conducted a recce trip to the proposed experimental site. They toured SICA's facilities and enjoyed a hike up Laimong Peak, taking in the natural beauty of the area. At the end of the trip, a Letter of Intent was drafted to formalise the partnership, with support from Wilmar's estate management team, including Mr. Barudin Pae (Group Manager of Sugut region), Mr. Calixtus Kamilus (Manager of Sekar Imej Estate) and Mr. Yeap Su Jeen (Senior Sustainability Manager).



OTHER WILMAR CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

Collaborative Landscape-Level Strategy for Reconnecting Sapagaya Wildlife Corridor in Oil Palm Landscapes

On 17 July 2025, the team undertook a collaborative field visit as part of a landscape-level project to reconnect the Sapagaya wildlife corridor within oil palm landscapes. The initiative brought together the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB), our Sabahmas team, an independent non-profit called Bringing Back Our Rare Animals, the Malaysia Forest Fund, and two potential donors, reflecting a shared commitment to biodiversity and ecosystem connectivity.



During the visit, the team observed the boundary area between MPOB and Sabahmas and gained first-hand insights into Sabahmas's ongoing rehabilitation work along the Segama River. The visit provided a valuable opportunity to strengthen partnerships, align strategies for habitat restoration and explore ways to enhance wildlife movement across fragmented landscapes.



Crocodile Conservation Operations at Suburmas

From 31 July to 4 August 2025, our team conducted a joint operation with the Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC) to safely capture and relocate a crocodile that had been spotted within the Suburmas Palm Oil Mill water catchment. The operation successfully removed the animal, ensuring worker safety while prioritising the crocodile's well-being.

Later, on 21 August, a Crocodile Nest Verification and Egg Collection operation was carried out with the SFC SWAT team following reports of a crocodile nest within Suburmas Oil Palm Plantation. Verification confirmed three active nests, from which a total of 126 crocodile eggs were carefully collected and handed over to SFC for proper management to support the conservation of this important species.



OTHER WILMAR CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

Strengthening Research Partnerships: MoA Signing with UNIMAS

On 27 August 2025 at Wilmar's Malaysia office in Kuala Lumpur and on 4 November 2025 at the Putrajaya Convention Centre, we proudly marked the official signing of a three-year Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) between Saremas, Wilmar and our long-term partner, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). This milestone celebrates and formalises a partnership dedicated to advancing research on the Ecological Dynamics of Medium to Large Mammals in Fragmented Forests and Oil Palm Plantations of Northern Sarawak, Malaysia.

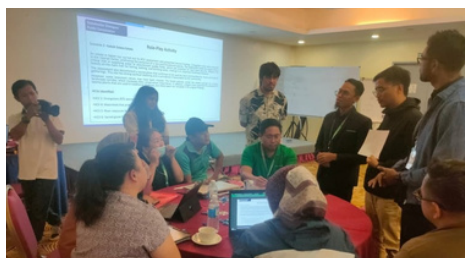


To kickstart the programme, a total of 66 camera traps were deployed in mid-August across Saremas, laying the foundation for long-term research collaboration. The MoA-signing not only commemorates this new chapter but also strengthens the ongoing collaboration between Wilmar and UNIMAS, and reinforces our shared commitment to conservation and scientific discovery.

HCV Lead Assessor Course: Building Expertise for Conservation

The HCV Lead Assessor Course, organised by Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil, brought together 25 participants at Samalaju Resort for an immersive learning experience in leading credible HCV assessments. From 29 September to 3 October, seven independent expert trainers from Malaysian Environmental Consultants guided participants through the principles and practices aligned with the HCV Resource Network Assessor Licensing Scheme.

Wilmar Plantations Sdn Bhd supported the programme by facilitating site visits to Saremas 1, Saremas 2, Kaminsky, Segarmas, Suai and Suburmas, giving participants a chance to apply their knowledge in real-world conservation settings. The course not only strengthened our in-house technical expertise, but also highlighted the importance of rigorous, on-the-ground assessments in protecting valuable ecosystems.



OTHER WILMAR CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES



JUNIOR RANGER PROGRAMME: YOUNG MINDS, WILD HEARTS

On 1 December 2025, 39 students and two teachers from Humana School Terusan 1 Estate participated in our Junior Ranger Programme. The half-day event opened with an engaging presentation covering the roles and functions of forests, Wilmar's conservation efforts and wildlife unique to Sabah. A short educational video on wild animals allowed students to learn animal names in both Bahasa Melayu (Malay) and English. Students were divided into two age groups to participate in hands-on activities.

The younger group explored their creativity through forest-themed colouring and bird-drawing exercises, while the older group enjoyed interactive games such as Animal Bingo and colouring and labelling local wildlife species. Enthusiasm ran high as students celebrated bingo victories, shared artistic ideas and engaged with their peers on what they learnt.



The programme concluded with group photos, recognition certificates for teachers and prizes for outstanding students. By the end of the programme, students had not only gained foundational knowledge in conservation and biodiversity but also developed teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills. Such experiences cultivate a strong sense of responsibility and pride in caring for the environment.

Hello friends of SICA,

As this newsletter reaches its 10th edition, I am grateful to join the journey as your new editor. Each issue carries the voices of the forest, the people who protect it and the stories that quietly shape our conservation work.

This milestone edition is both a reflection and an invitation to pause, look back at how far we have come and continue walking forward together.

Thank you for being part of SICA's story. I look forward to sharing many more moments from the field, the forest and the people who care for it.

And a little fun to end:
Why did the SICA forest get promoted?
Because it was outstanding in its field!

—Wanji Chua
Conservation Officer





SICA stands as Wilmar's largest conservation initiative in Malaysia, encompassing 2,469 hectares of forest fragments deep within Sabah's Beluran District. Nestled within the company's plantation concession, the SICA project is a testament to the power of collaboration, uniting Wilmar and key stakeholders, including local communities, in a shared mission to protect the precious Lowland Mixed Dipterocarp Forest.

With a bold vision to transform SICA into a Biodiversity and Carbon Research Centre by 2030, the initiative is driven by three pillars: biodiversity conservation, capacity-building and community-based approaches. From 2022 to 2024, this meaningful effort was partially supported by Wilmar Europe.

This project is a reminder that corporate responsibility, when paired with local stewardship, can lead to lasting environmental impact. Wilmar's commitment to conservation is a call to action. Let SICA inspire more individuals, organisations, companies and communities to realise that conservation is not a choice, but a shared responsibility.

Together, we can safeguard nature's legacy for generations to come.

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