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SUSTAINABILITY BRIEF

Sweet Lessons from Borneo:

Small Bees, New Possibilities





Smaller than a grain of rice and without a sting, stingless bees could offer a new source of income for communities in the 10 villages surrounding Wilmar's Sekar Imej Conservation Area (SICA) in Beluran district, Sabah, Malaysia. Known as *kelulut*, these tiny bees are important pollinators that help plants reproduce, contributing to the conservation of native biodiversity. They also produce *kelulut* honey which commands a premium because of its scarcity, offering potential for rural livelihood development.

Established in 2019, SICA protects close to 2,500 hectares of lowland mixed dipterocarp forest, home to endangered species such as the Northern Gray Gibbon, native to northern Borneo, and the elusive spiny hill turtle, endemic to Southeast Asia.

Wilmar's approach to conservation at SICA combines science-based biodiversity protection with community engagement. As part of our efforts to support rural livelihoods, our conservation team launched a stingless bee farming training programme in April 2025, followed by a second session in August 2026.

LEARNING TO FARM STINGLESS BEES

Between 26 and 28 August 2026, 18 participants, including SICA rangers, Wilmar's estate officers and interns, received training from Marianah Rompungan of Pace' A Voi, a Sabah-based social enterprise specialising in sustainable stingless bee farming. Together with her assistant, Olivia Sabin, Marianah taught participants how to identify stingless bees foraging in the forest, transfer wild colonies safely into hive boxes and split hives to establish new colonies.

The three-day programme combined theoretical sessions on colony management with practical training in hive handling and maintenance. Participants learned how to assess colony health, identify early signs of problems, perform routine maintenance and reduce the risk of pests and diseases.

The training also provided an opportunity to establish new colonies and assess the progress of existing ones. On the first day, six new stingless bee colonies were installed behind a storage facility at Sekar Imej Estate. Five were sponsored by Wilmar Europe Trading while the sixth was a gift from Pace' A Voi. The installation took almost two hours.





The initiative has also seen some of our SICA rangers start their own stingless bee farming projects at home. Since the first training session, some rangers have successfully located wild stingless bee colonies, shared Chua Wanji, Conservation Officer at Wilmar Plantations Sdn Bhd.

THE WORK BEHIND THE HONEY

Establishing colonies is only the first step. Keeping them healthy requires careful management, regular maintenance and protection from pests and harsh weather.

During the August 2026 training, participants inspected four colonies installed at Kampung Mononood during the first training session more than a year earlier. Three of the hives, including two young colonies, had been abandoned by the bees.

Stingless bee colonies are vulnerable to fungal infections and attacks from ants, lizards, rats and even some species of frogs. Young colonies require particular care to ensure they thrive.

The only active colony was a mature one that had expanded and needed a larger hive box. Marianah demonstrated the proper techniques for transferring the colony and carrying out maintenance work. Participants also sampled the surplus *kelulut* honey remaining in the old hive.

On the third day, participants tested a battery-powered honey harvesting unit from Indonesia, brought in by Edrin Moss, Wilmar's Assistant General Manager in Sustainability. Marianah also shared tips for protecting colonies from harsh conditions, including heavy rain and prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures.

The experience highlighted the care and practical knowledge needed to maintain healthy colonies. For stingless bee farming to become a viable source of income, these colonies must first thrive and produce a sufficient yield of honey.







FROM COLONIES TO A VIABLE HARVEST

Our SICA rangers are monitoring the health of the colonies every week. Their maintenance work includes reapplying grease to the cement stands to prevent ants and other pests from climbing up to the hive boxes.

The first harvest from the six new colonies is expected around early December 2026. Pace' A Voi will return to demonstrate the harvesting process and has made a buy-back offer for the honey. In the longer term, at least 20 colonies will need to be established to achieve a commercially viable honey yield.

The coming harvest will be an important step in assessing the potential of stingless bee farming as a livelihood opportunity. While the initiative is still in its early stages, the training, new colonies and continued care by SICA rangers are laying the groundwork for an approach that could support rural livelihoods alongside Wilmar's forest conservation efforts.

