

## UTAR Agriculture Science Journal

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## Editorial

### Imaging the present, imagining the future

One of the most important publications documenting the natural products of the tropics is the two-volume 2,444-page Dictionary of the Economic Products of the Malay Peninsula, published in 1935 by I.H. Burkill. In this book, Burkill brought together all the information he could obtain on every species of plant, animal or mineral found in the Malay Peninsula. He also included plants from other tropical regions that had been grown and tested in the Botanic Gardens Singapore. His primary sources were local experts, published scientific reports, and his own observations. In his time, the local population depended heavily on natural resources for food, medicines and fuel, and nature was also the source of all the materials needed for building, hunting, entertainment and other activities. Imported goods were only available in the towns, mainly to cater for the small population of European expatriates. Popular knowledge of nature and natural products was at its peak during World War II when people were forced to live off the land. The decline of dependence on nature began after peace was restored and has now reached the point at which we have to refer to Burkill's dictionary for information that no longer exists anywhere else. Sadly, there is not a single image in the book – no pictures of any plants, animals or natural products, none of the people using them, and none of the cultural environment in which they were used.

It is now possible to supplement Burkill's Dictionary with illustrated articles, and UASJ aims to promote such documentation, but the effort will have to be dispersed over an indefinite period of time. As each article, such as the one in this issue on the use of leaves as wrappers, is published, it will join an ever-growing digital archive that is publicly available free-of-charge. We need to document the images of the present so that they will always be available for reference in the future.

In addition to documenting and imaging the present, UASJ also aims to inspire people to imagine the future. Most advances are incremental ones that can be predicted by extrapolation from the present. However, the most important advances are usually unexpected, innovated by those who dare to enquire, imagine, and explore unlikely possibilities. How can we squeeze more food production from small farms that are now barely able to support their farmers? Can the delicious pineapple be made even more delicious? Can an oil palm tree be made permanently short and productive so that it never needs replanting?

From images to imagination, it always seems impossible until it happens, like humans flying faster than birds, men walking on the moon, information transmitted at the speed of light, and huge expanding libraries that are independent of buildings, shelves and paper and that travel with you so long as you have a laptop or smartphone.

Story-telling is a powerful tool for imagining and it is even more powerful when combined with images. Most of the stories in this issue could not be told effectively without images hence they could never be published in a normal scientific journal. UASJ provides a new window of opportunity for authors to present information and ideas in agricultural science in a way that no other medium can provide.