



**IRSHAD MOBARAK**

Naturalist/conservationist, 55

## OUR MAN IN...

# Langkawi

Known affectionately as the 'Junglewalla', the founder of Natural History Tours, TV personality and Malaysia's best-known naturalist and conservationist believes that only nature can show us the way

Images: [Mark Eveleigh](#)

I like to describe myself as 'an optimistic conservationist'. We are a rare breed. I believe that if we're intelligent enough to learn from nature, and to adapt as evolution has taught us, then we still have a chance to undo the harm we've done to our planet. Above all, we must try to learn from nature – try to adapt quickly.

Although I'm best known in Malaysia for my appearances on television programmes as the Junglewalla, I'm also resident naturalist at The Datai on Langkawi, one of Malaysia's leading luxury resorts. This little island is just over half the size of Bahrain or Singapore, but it has more birdlife than the whole of England. You can even see the Wreathed Hornbill and the Great Hornbill, which from the tip of its beak to the tip of its tail measures 1.30m.

Langkawi is one of the most incredibly ancient patches of real estate in the world. Machinchang Mountain, on Langkawi's north coast, is the oldest mountain in the Malay Peninsula; 240 million years ago, that great craggy outcrop of rock was still part of the so-

called supercontinent of Gondwanaland (comprising what would later become Australia, Africa and South America). Then, 200 million years ago, tectonic forces pushed Machinchang above the surface of the sea to create Langkawi Island. In fact, glacial dropstones from the Antarctic that date back an incredible one billion years have been found on Machinchang.

This is the perfect place to try to understand what evolution really means. There are species on this island that you can find in very few places. Langkawi is home to what I call the 'Fabulous Flying Five': we have flying snakes, flying squirrels, flying foxes, flying dragons and one of the world's most unusual animals, the flying lemur. Often called the colugo, the skin monkey or even the cloaked monkey, it's certainly the strangest animal on the island, and has caused science no end of confusion since it was first described in 1757. Carl Von Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy, first classified it as a gliding primate – Dermoptera. Later he was corrected, and in subsequent decades the colugo continued to be shifted from one pigeonhole to the next. Now it seems







**RARE BIRD /**  
Malaysia is home to bird species such as the Wreathed Hornbill (top left)

**FLIGHT TIME /**  
The flying lemur or colugo is one of the strangest animals on Langkawi, according to Mobarak (bottom left)

**HIGH TIMES /**  
Machinchang Mountain (above right) is the oldest mountain in the Malay Peninsula

that new DNA evidence suggests that Linnaeus was indeed correct, and that the colugo may be the world's only flying primate, after all.

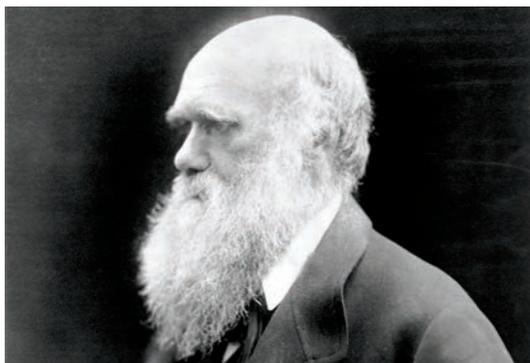
Datai Bay is arguably the best place in the world to see colugos soaring through the canopy; I helped National Geographic capture amazing footage of them when they came to film here recently.

Langkawi is becoming known as one of Asia's wildlife hotspots. You see herds of barking deer browsing on Datai beach, and big troops of macaques and spectacled langur monkeys. What I really appreciate about the walks I do here is that they give me the perfect opportunity to enthuse a wide cross-section of the public with the potential for modern man, if we can only learn to evolve.

Darwin wrote that in nature it is not the strongest, nor the more intelligent, that is successful, but rather those most adaptable to change. He didn't actually coin the term 'survival of the fittest' – it was wrongly attributed to him in the fifth edition of *On The Origin of Species* (after his death).

The new field of science known as biomimicry is opening up a whole range of possibilities. Nature can teach us designs, processes and complete systems. From the beak of the kingfisher we've designed more efficient high-speed trains. The Begonia plant lives in the world's densest jungles, where only 10 per cent of the sunlight can filter through the canopy, yet droplets of water collected on its leaves make it super-efficient at harvesting that life-





never sits still here. The seasons are constantly changing even in a rainforest: if you come here during the September-October wet season there are millions of fireflies and butterflies; with the first substantial rains, the lung fish (a living fossil in evolutionary terms) comes out of hibernation to migrate to floodplains, sometimes crossing roads in little queues one behind the other. I like the dry season best, because, unlike a desert, which bursts into bloom during a rare rain-shower, here on Langkawi the rainforest begins flowering at the start of the three-month dry season that falls from December to February. For many birds and mammals this is the season of love and courtship. It's an amazing time. Love is literally in the air on Langkawi.

[irshad-mobarak.com](http://irshad-mobarak.com)

giving light. By mimicking this simple solution we could mitigate energy needs by designing indoor solar panels for low-light environments such as high-rise buildings and apartment-blocks. The humble coral polyp has shown us how to produce cement at ambient temperatures in a far more effective and environmentally friendly way. We've ignored nature's teaching for far too long, but the coral polyp, the kingfisher and the Begonia are only a few examples of how nature could teach us to live in balance if we make the effort to learn.

When I was nine years old I started a small business selling packages made out of big jungle leaves to market vendors in our little town. They were simple, tough little 'envelopes' that could be used to carry fish, meat and tofu. They were, of course, completely biodegradable, and my friends and I could harvest them sustainably from the forest. We sold them by the bunch for very little but, even at that price, we couldn't compete when plastics arrived in our town. By the time I was 12 my little business was bankrupt and our marketplace was already becoming a garbage tip. It was an early lesson that I've never forgotten.

Malaysia's incredible wildlife, from the forest elephants of the mainland, to the orangutans of Malaysian Borneo, to the colugos here on Langkawi, has completely thrilled me since I was a little boy. The most unusual job I've ever done was to be a banker. I was a banker for four-and-half-years but, in all honesty, I joined the bank because they had a good athletics and rugby team that I wanted to join.

I've been very fortunate to have carved this reputation as the Junglewalla, and to spend so much time in the forest on Langkawi. Nature

**YOUNG LOVE /**  
Mobarak has been "thrilled" by Malaysia's wildlife, including the orangutans of Malaysian Borneo (top), since childhood

**EVOLUTIONARY THEORY /**  
Mobarak agrees with Charles Darwin (middle) that the most successful species are those that adapt best to change

**MONKEY BUSINESS /**  
Langkawi is home to many monkey species, including the spectacled langur (bottom)

IMAGES: MARK EVELEIGH, GETTY IMAGES, CORBIS IMAGES

