

A Journey of Conservation, Culture & Community

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In the heart of rural Malaysia, where mist clings to ancient trees and the calls of hornbills echo through the lush canopy, lies the Belum-Temengor Rainforest – a living ecosystem older than the Amazon. Here, the Pulau Banding Foundation (PBF) stands as a guardian, not only of the forest’s biodiversity but of the people who call it home.

The Belum-Temengor forest isn’t just a place of immense biodiversity but also of heritage, culture, and community. The Orang Asli – Malaysia’s Indigenous people – live here in harmony with the land. Their traditions, passed down through generations, are as deeply rooted as the trees themselves. But the world beyond the forest is changing fast, and with it comes both challenge and opportunity.

That’s where the journey with Steelcase and our Changemakers begins. In 2023, Changemakers KL (Kuala Lumpur) – a team of passionate young leaders from the Steelcase Better Futures Community – took part in our Better is Possible Design Challenge. This global initiative invites emerging changemakers (employees and partners) to tackle pressing social and environmental issues through design-led thinking, empathy, and collaboration. Their mission: to ignite climate action through community-driven solutions. One idea stood out – supporting the Indigenous communities of Belum-Temengor by blending tradition with sustainability.

Design Challenge workshop in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Our partnership with PBF blossomed. In 2024, our teams helped organize the Carnival Fundraising Day. It brought together Changemakers and forest stewards in a celebration of culture and compassion. Booths brimmed with crocheted crafts and hand-made treasures, while the scents of local delicacies wafted through the air. Every ringgit raised – 6,660 in total – went directly to school uniforms and bags for the children, purchased from the community itself to ensure the cycle of support stayed local.

Carnival Fundraising Day in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

But the journey didn’t end there.

Recently, a team of volunteers made it their mission to see the impacted communities for themselves – and understand the difference they could make on the ground. They set out on a three-day expedition to the forest. Our Changemakers were graciously welcomed by representatives from PBF and those living in nearby villages.

Changemakers Kuala Lumpur visited the aborigines’ village on one of the islands at Belum-Temengor with donation items.

Together, the entire team helped clean the village grounds, shared lessons on hygiene and waste management, and distributed essentials to 150 adults and 40 children. A waste/compost area was set aside, and the village plans to turn it into a place to grow food in the near future.

Changemakers Kuala Lumpur helps to clean the village grounds.

At night, volunteers hiked the Banding Trail, guided by researchers from the Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMKTrace). They learned about symbiotic fungi, elusive tapirs, and the delicate balance that sustains life. On the final day, they visited the Pulau Banding Research Center, where Steelcase furniture now supports the work of conservation scientists.

Our teams gained valuable insight into collaborating with indigenous communities, learning to prioritize their voices and values. These efforts reflect our commitment to empowering the community while preserving its dignity, heritage, and the delicate ecosystems surrounding it.

Changemakers Kuala Lumpur engages with the children of the aborigines and offers guidance.

The trip ended, but our mission has deepened. Plans are now in motion to install water tanks and piping systems to provide more access to clean water. We're also working to create educational videos and posters on waste management, and continue building bridges between the rainforest and the world beyond.

Changemakers Kuala Lumpur and PBF representatives discussing next steps.

As the Belum-Temengor Rainforest awaits recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, its heritage lies not just in its age or unique biodiversity but also in the unity of the people who came together to protect it.

We're doing better for people by developing initiatives that help communities thrive and foster inclusion, in our own Steelcase family and around the globe, and by always acting with integrity. We're doing better for the planet by committing to a net-zero future - making, sourcing and delivering products to reduce our carbon footprint, designing for circularity, and choosing and using materials responsibly. Working toward a more inclusive, sustainable and resilient future has always been part of who we are. Because when we do better, we help the world work better.