New fuel prices
Aug 15 – Aug 21

RON97	RON95	Diesel
RM1.98 (+5 sen)	RM1.68 (+5 sen)	RM1.82 (+3 sen)

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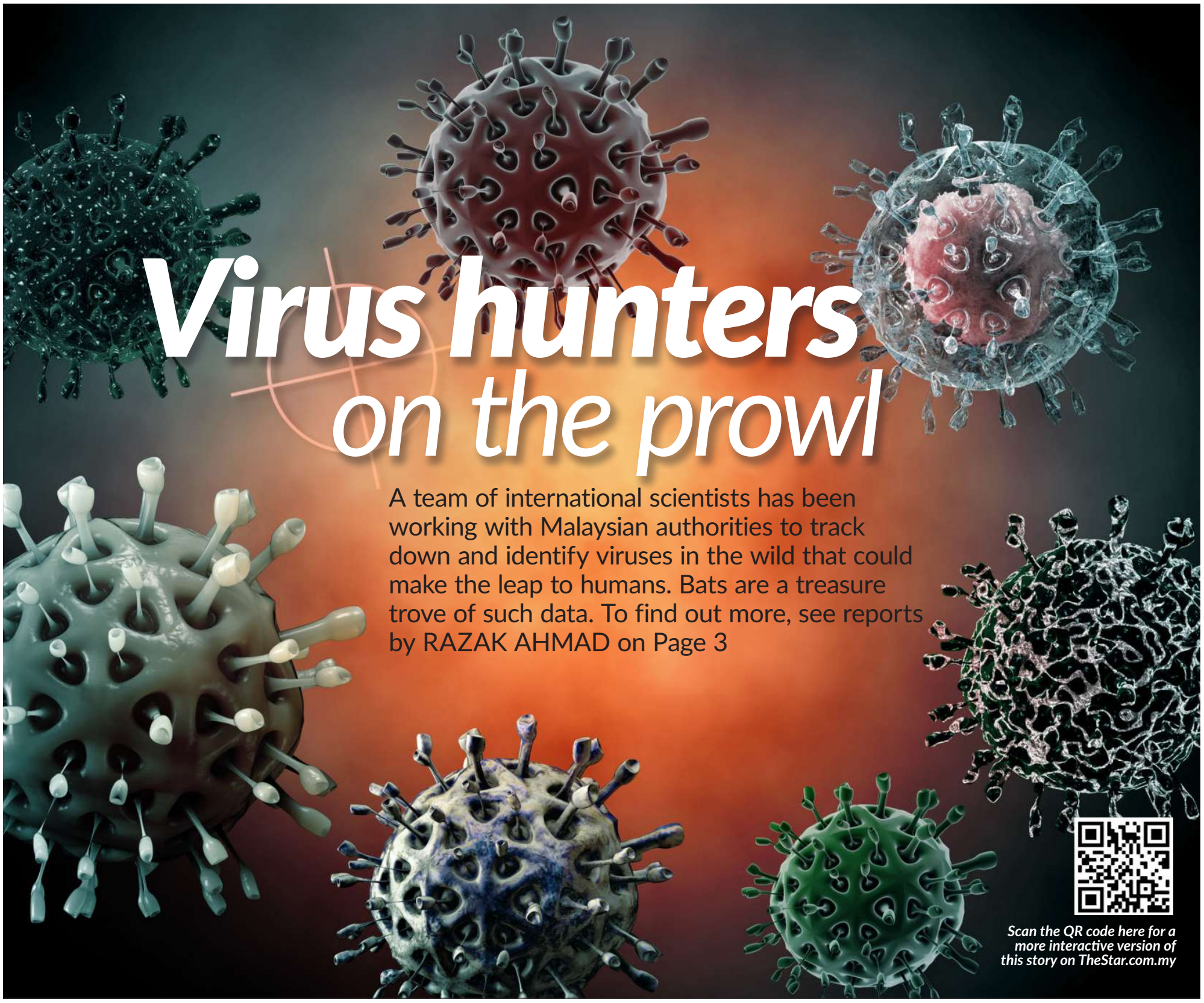
Bank Negara: Worst is behind us

Economic growth may have shrunk 8.3% in the first half of 2020 but improvements in several key indicators since April – some at a faster pace than in pre-MCO days – give hope of a brighter outlook in the second half. ***> See Page 2 of StarBizWeek***



Virus hunters on the prowl

A team of international scientists has been working with Malaysian authorities to track down and identify viruses in the wild that could make the leap to humans. Bats are a treasure trove of such data. To find out more, see reports by RAZAK AHMAD on Page 3

Scan the QR code here for a more interactive version of this story on TheStar.com.my

Nation

M'sian police ready to work with Filipino counterparts to wrap up Sabah kidnapping cases involving Idang Susukan. ***>4***

Nation

Shah Alam City Council's enforcement department director latest to be remanded over illegal protection racket. ***>6***

Winged 'gardeners' need protection

PETALING JAYA: When it comes to preventing wildlife viruses from spreading to people, bats are not our enemies.

Similar to some other types of wildlife, bats are "natural reservoirs", which means they may host certain viruses within their bodies.

But far from being a threat, they play a vital role in Malaysia's ecosystem, economy and human health.

Fruit bats, for example, can be considered the country's "winged, night-time gardeners" as they pollinate certain types of trees and disperse seeds, said flying fox conservation ecology specialist Dr Sheema Abdul Aziz.

She explained that fruit bats (from the Pteropodidae family) are the principal pollinators for durian.

Fruit bats may also pollinate other fruits such as mango and certain timber species, though she said more research was needed to verify this.

Research in Sarawak and Terengganu has shown that fruit bats help pollinate mangrove trees such as the Sonneratia (known in Malay as berembang and perepat).

"Fruit bats are critically important for maintaining wetland ecosystems such as mangroves, which is in turn important for other conservation initiatives such as fireflies, coral reefs, marine ecosystems and local livelihoods that depend on fisheries and eco-tourism," said Dr Sheema.

Bats are also important as seed dispersers.

> "Fruit bats are critically important for maintaining wetland ecosystems such as mangroves."
>
> **Dr Sheema Abdul Aziz**

When fruit bats feed on fruits, they are providing a gardening service in rainforests, orchards and gardens by either carrying off large seeds and dropping them elsewhere, or swallowing small seeds and defecating them, sometimes while still in flight.

Dr Sheema said this role is vital for reforesting cleared or degraded areas, as well as maintaining the health of multiple ecosystems.

Bats also provide important pest control services by feeding on the insects that damage farmers' crops such as rice, and help reduce populations of disease vectors such as mosquitoes.

Despite their importance, bats are victims of negative perception such as health threats and pests. They are also under threat.

Malaysia's two flying fox species – *Pteropus vampyrus* and *Pteropus hypomelanus* – are listed as endangered by the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) due to intensive hunting and habitat loss, among other reasons.

"Essentially any bat species that relies on rainforest, mangrove and swamp habitats is at risk due to logging and clearance activities.

"Any bat species that relies on cave or limestone habitats is also at risk from quarrying," said Dr Sheema, who is also the co-founder and president of Rimba, a non-profit conservation research group.

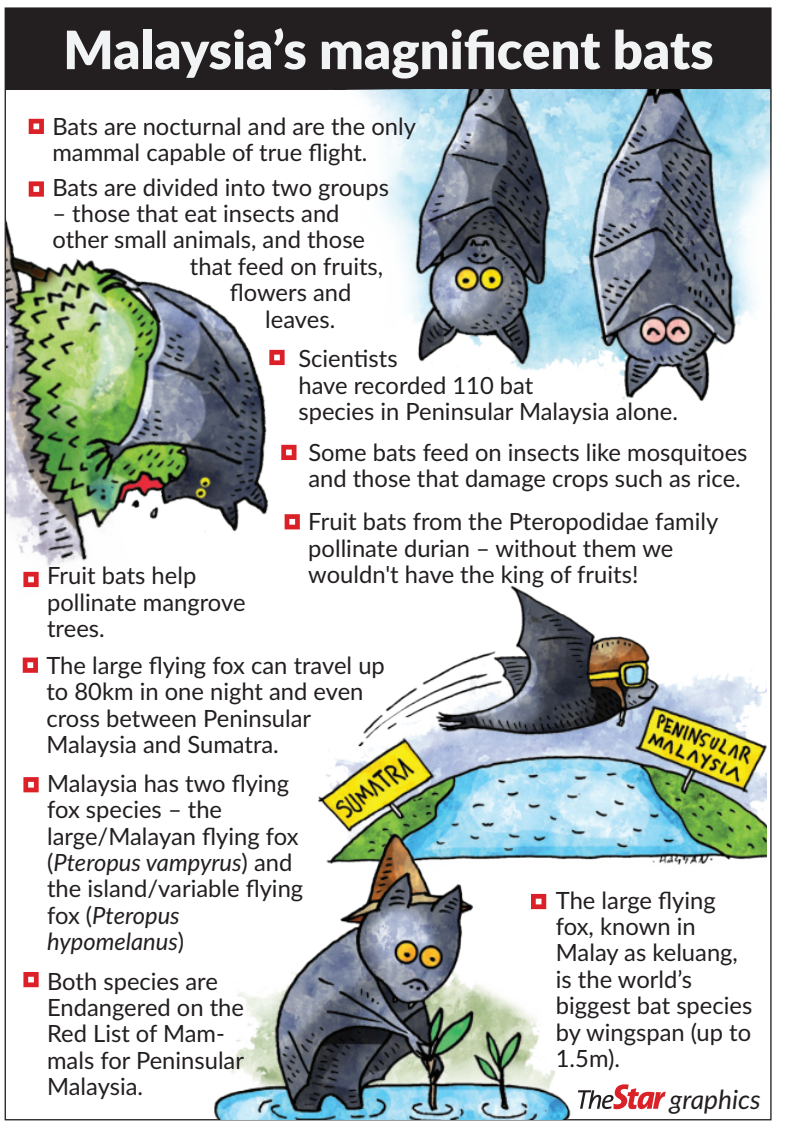
In Peninsular Malaysia, Perhilitan is taking steps to fully protect flying foxes under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 while in Sarawak, all of its bat species are legally protected under the state's Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1998.

In 2012, Rimba started Project Pteropus to help conserve Malaysia's endangered flying foxes.

Under the project, a peninsula-wide survey of flying fox populations has been conducted to get a better idea of their population and distribution, and to identify important sites for habitat protection.

"We also hope to start working with other partners to expand further on public outreach to really get this message out to a wider audience so that more Malaysians learn to start loving our native bats," Dr Sheema said.

To find out more about Project Pteropus, go to *https://rimba.ngo/project-pteropus/*



76 new viruses found in Malaysia

They are part of nearly 1,000 discovered in 30 countries over the past decade

By RAZAK AHMAD
razak@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: An international team of scientists working with Malaysian authorities has found 12 new coronaviruses and 64 other novel viruses throughout the country over the past decade.

The new viruses identified in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah are part of 949 novel viruses and 217 known viruses detected so far in 30 countries by Predict, an international project that began in 2010.

The ongoing project aims to hunt for new viruses in wildlife, livestock and people throughout the world and determine which zoonotic viruses carried by wildlife for tens of thousands of years have the potential to spill over to livestock and people.

Predict is part of the United States Agency for International Development's (Usaid) Emerging Pandemic Threats programme and is managed in Malaysia by EcoHealth Alliance, a global conservation and pandemic-prevention NGO.

Tom Hughes, director of Conservation Medicine and project coordinator for EcoHealth Alliance in Malaysia, said the 12 new coronaviruses found in this country were identified in samples taken from bats and rats.

"We don't know yet which of those 12 novel coronaviruses – if any – we need to be worried about. The next thing we need to do is to further characterise those viruses," said Hughes.

A novel virus is one that has not previously been recorded.

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses, some of which can cause illnesses, including Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Covid-19.

Research in progress: Hughes (left) and EcoHealth Alliance veterinarian Dr Melinda Rostal sampling a captured bat. — Photo courtesy of EcoHealth Alliance/Conservation Medicine

The nearly 1,000 novel viruses that Predict has identified globally include the Bombali ebolavirus, Zaire ebolavirus, Marburg virus, as well as MERS and SARS-related coronaviruses.

In Malaysia, Predict is carried out in close cooperation with the Health Ministry, Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan), Veterinary Services Department (DVS), Sabah Wildlife Department, Sabah State Health Department, Danau Girang Field Centre, Universiti Malaysia Sabah and Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Samples have so far been collected from more than 1,400 people, including the Orang Asli, as well as nearly 5,000 animals in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah.

More than 100,000 tests have been done so far on the samples collected.

Hughes said experiments were ongoing with some of the 76 novel viruses identified in Malaysia to see which among them could attach to, infect and replicate in human cells.

"Any novel virus that can do that is a potential threat to human health and our economies," he said.

Hughes explained that while some wild animals such as bats are natural reservoirs for zoonotic viruses, they are not to blame when their viruses spill over to people.

"It's caused by a lack of respect for the natural environment. It is human beings changing the environment, changing our interactions with wildlife and changing our contact with these wild animals that create these disease emergence events," he said.

Information on all the novel viruses is available online at Predict's health map website (*http://data.predict.global/*).

Hughes said reports on all the new viruses that Predict identified in Malaysia had been reviewed and approved by the Health Ministry, Perhilitan, DVS, Sabah Wildlife Department and Sabah Health Department before being uploaded on the health map website.

Apart from identifying new viruses, Predict also works closely with authorities in host countries to help build laboratory and diagnostics capacity for zoonotic diseases.

In Malaysia, Predict has helped to build laboratory capacity in Sabah and the peninsula along with other efforts to help the country increase its pandemic response readiness.

In an interview with a US public radio news magazine that was broadcast in May, Hughes praised Malaysia as a regional leader in dealing with Covid-19 and zoonosis.

This was connected to the lessons Malaysia had learnt and applied from its experience in fighting zoonotic diseases such as the Nipah virus in the 1990s, he said.

Read this story online at *thestar.com.my* for interactive content and more information on the viruses identified.

Weather

	GEORGE TOWN	K. LUMPUR	JOHOR BARU	KOTA BARU	K. KINABALU	KUCHING
AM	No rain	No rain	No rain	No rain	Cloudy	No rain
PM	No rain	Thunderstorms	Thunderstorms	Thunderstorms	Isolated rain	Isolated thunderstorms

Prayer times

ALOR SETAR		PENANG		K. LUMPUR		JOHOR BARU		KUANTAN		KOTA BARU	
Subuh	6:02	Subuh	6:04	Subuh	6:01	Subuh	5:54	Subuh	5:56	Subuh	5:56
Zohor	1:25	Zohor	1:25	Zohor	1:20	Zohor	1:12	Zohor	1:15	Zohor	1:18
Asar	4:40	Asar	4:40	Asar	4:37	Asar	4:30	Asar	4:32	Asar	4:33
Maghrib	7:34	Maghrib	7:33	Maghrib	7:27	Maghrib	7:16	Maghrib	7:20	Maghrib	7:26
Isyak	8:45	Isyak	8:44	Isyak	8:38	Isyak	8:27	Isyak	8:31	Isyak	8:34