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Letter to the Editor

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Motorist insensitivity riled up elephant

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is concerned by a recent incident on the East-West Highway in which a wild elephant stomped on a car bonnet after it was riled by honking from a motorist.

Under such circumstances, when encountering an elephant, the Wildlife Department has in the past advised motorists against using high-beam lights and to refrain from honking. However, a motorist through his ignorance or impatience preferred to honk, resulting in the consequences of a damaged bonnet to a car. Luckily the five passengers escaped unhurt.

Wildlife officials often reported that encounter with elephants along the East-West Highway, which runs between the district capital of Gerik in Perak and the district of Jeli in Kelantan, is common.

These wild elephants from the Royal Belum State Park and Temenggor Forest Reserve often wander around the highway early in the morning and late at night in search of food when visibility is low.

Users of the East-West Highway are advised against panicking when encountering wild elephants roaming or crossing the highway but to allow them to pass unhindered.

According to an animal expert, for most animal encounters it is best to stay quiet, to not make sudden movements and to back away slowly. When an animal finds itself in a position where it feels threatened or where one of its family members is threatened, whether those threats are real or imagined, it may trigger the animal's flight response.

The animal may want to get away but if it feels it cannot escape, it may choose to defend itself. If there are babies present, this would make things even more problematic. Walking out of a car is also risky and should be avoided by all cost. Using a camera with a flash is a definite no.

An encounter with an elephant may be a sight to behold but many are unaware of the risks faced by these pachyderms. The Gerik-Jeli route has become a site of carnage for wildlife from neighbouring forests. Signages had been erected in the past to warn motorists of wildlife crossings but this is not enough since there are highly irresponsible and reckless drivers.

Rapid development has squeezed out our local wildlife and elephants which have lost much of their habitats. They are now forced out to forage for food like grass, palm trees and bamboo. With roads crisscrossing across wildlife habitats, many other wildlife species have become road victims along with the elephants.

Based on Perhilitan's statistics of 2018, a total of 2,444 wild animals became roadkill from 2012 to 2017, with monitor lizards having the highest fatalities at 764, followed by civet cats (446), monkeys (439), wild boars (265), snakes (147) and wild cats (88). Other threatened wildlife species that have been killed on roads are tapirs, sun bears (six), elephants (four), mountain goats (two), leopards (two) and tiger (one).

All wildlife have the right to roam freely and safely. In the name of development, wildlife is paying the price with their lives. The situation is serious with the exodus of cars during school holidays and festive seasons.

Drivers ought to be more responsible when driving at night. Their killing of wildlife may be unintentional or intentional. Educational awareness on what to do when approaching wildlife designated areas should be incorporated into their driving lessons.

The Transport Ministry, Highway authorities, road engineers, planners should take into account the impact roads will have on wildlife before the construction of highways and roads. The planning stages should include the Wildlife department, wildlife biologists, conservationists and NGOs to mitigate road-related impacts on wildlife.

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