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Letter To Editor

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Highly irresponsible for states to promote deforestation

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is gravely concerned that several states in the country are continuing to promote deforestation for various purposes, instead of taking measures to protect and conserve our remaining forest resources.

Such efforts run counter to current thinking and trends in the era of climate change and the post COVID-19 pandemic, which is to promote green recovery efforts and to steer the nation to a truly more sustainable development pathway, which is in harmony with nature.

As stated in a most recent Global Biodiversity Outlook of the Secretariat to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), “The international focus on sustainable development as a pressing agenda for our century, with the particular prominence of tackling climate change as an existential issue of high urgency in political and public discourse, builds an opportunity to bring biodiversity into the mainstream. Many of the measures that are required to tackle poverty, reduce hunger, tackle climate change and reduce the risk of future pandemics are also those that are needed to support biodiversity, so there is potential for a powerful shared agenda giving attention and resources to conservation and sustainable use which have often been lacking in the past.”

Instead of embarking on a transformative green agenda, many states in the country are carrying on business-as-usual policies that allow deforestation and the destruction of our biodiversity including in our oceans, thus undermining the nation’s efforts at implementing our obligations under the Paris Agreement, CBD and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The latest news of such deforestation plans is the action by the Kedah government to allow the logging of 25,000 hectares (ha.) of rainforests in the state, which the Menteri Besar claims will not affect the water catchment forests.

The main problem is that the Kedah state has only gazetted 16% of the 106,418 ha of the Ulu Muda Forest Reserves as protected forests under the state’s Forest Enactment.

Civil society groups have been calling for the protection of the entire Greater Ulu Muda forest complex which comprises 163,000 ha, and if we take this into account, only about 10% of the Ulu Muda are fully protected, with the remainder being susceptible to forest conversions and deforestation for all kinds of purposes.

The assurance by the Kedah MB that the proposed logging will not affect water catchment forests does not hold water and offers no comfort, as ecosystems do not function within limited legal definitions. Full legal protection must be given to the entire Ulu Muda forest complex to help maintain its ecosystem and environmental integrity.

As we have pointed out repeatedly, the destruction of the rainforests in Ulu Muda at such a scale threatens water supply security in Perlis, Kedah and Penang, especially during the annual dry seasons.

Early last year, the farmers in the rice bowl of the nation experienced prolonged drought, which affected their livelihoods and food security. With climate change, such droughts are expected to be more frequent and more prolonged.

The Greater Ulu Muda forest complex is the water catchment area for the Muda Dam, which supplies Sungai Muda in the South and the Pedu and Ahning Dams, which supplies Sungai Kedah in the North.

The raw water supply of about 70% of Perlis, 96% of Kedah and 80% of Penang originates from Ulu Muda's rainforests.

Around 4.2 million people will suffer as a result, in addition to the thousands who will suffer economic impacts due to water shortages and disruption in the northern region.

The short-sightedness of the Kedah Menteri Besar to log the rainforests and to also allow the exploitation of minerals, including rare earth elements for short-term gains must be urgently stopped.

The federal government must prevail over the state, in ending such environmentally unsustainable ventures, and help provide the necessary financial resources to the state for the protection of the forests and biodiversity.

As SAM has pointed out before, international funds are available for such efforts and states must be encouraged to understand that it makes economic and environmental sense to keep forests and biodiversity intact, as this is the only way to secure our current and future sustainability in the wake of climate change and the health pandemic.

We strongly appeal to the Kedah government to fully protect and gazette the entire Greater Ulu Muda forest complex of 163,000 ha in perpetuity, and act in the interest of not only its' own citizens but that of the northern region as well, as the nation as a whole.

For that, the Kedah MB will be recognised as a leader who has left a great legacy for current and future generations. Other states too should do the same!

In addition, we call on the federal government to put in place genuine green recovery efforts that put environment and biodiversity at the centre of decision-making, if we are to prevent future calamities that result in catastrophic economic and health impacts.

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