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Letter to Editor

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Accountability for the deaths of Sabah's elephants

Sabah has had a challenging year with constant media attention on wildlife issues and numerous deaths of pygmy elephants. In 2019, 24 deaths were recorded with five occurring in the space of four months. These deaths are seldom attributed to natural causes. Illegal hunting, poaching, poisoning and snaring are common causes of these deaths. Although accidents do occur, most deaths appear to have been deliberate, retaliatory killings, after the elephants enter into agricultural areas, where crops are eaten and the ground is trampled. Whatever the motive, the killings are unnecessary.

It is evident that human-elephant conflict (HEC) is a major issue that is now confronting Sabah. These elephants are displaced as a result of the loss of their habitat, which has been divided into sections, impacting their home ranges and natural movement. One of the main causes of these divisions is the issuance of licences for monoculture plantations in the midst of the animal's habitat. In the end, this has resulted in increased conflicts and killings of elephants in Sabah.

According to Global Forest Watch, Sabah lost nearly 900,000 hectares of land between 2001 and 2013 or about 15 per cent of its tree cover. As more and more natural habitats are being cleared to make way for roads, settlements and plantations, there is an increased incidence of HEC occurring today more than before. Closed in from all directions and with their food sources destroyed, these pachyderms have no choice but to turn to oil palm trees for food.

Recent series of elephant deaths in Sabah on or near oil palm plantations have shocked and outraged many. One of the most brutal killings was the incident carried out by two plantation guards and a worker tasked to keep wildlife away from company grounds. The pachyderm's carcass in Sungai Udin, Tawau district, was riddled with more than 70 bullets. (Plantation guard arrested over latest elephant killing in Sabah - Malay Mail 21st Oct 2019). Therefore it is time for the state government to come up with long term solutions to prevent further deforestation and ecological destruction in Sabah and introduce a stricter regulatory framework to protect the Bornean elephants, which must be strictly observed by the plantation industry, regardless of the type of crops they grow.

All parties that are responsible for the deaths of this Borneo's iconic species or even by further damaging their habitat must be held fully accountable. No party should be permitted to claim ignorance as an excuse any longer. The elephants have been in Sabah way longer than any of the monoculture plantations. Therefore, plantation corporations themselves must be held accountable if any of their employees, permanent or contractual, are proven to be involved in causing harm and death to the animal. It is unfair and in fact, ineffective, for the

law to only punish the ground and security employees working in these plantations, whose lives may also be directly endangered by HEC, especially if they lack the appropriate training in managing such conflicts. Equally important, a limit must also be set to halt the conversions of forests into such plantations.

There must be a stronger policy framework to guide the relevant government agencies, civil society and local communities to work more closely together in order to create a more effective system of managing the ecosystems of Sabah's elephant habitats. Such a collaboration is urgently needed to check on poaching activities and preserve the state's wildlife populations. Citizens in fact must be encouraged to play a more significant role in protecting the Bornean elephants. They must be encouraged to be more vigilant and readily report any suspicious activities to the Sabah Wildlife Department and Sabah Forestry Department.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) reiterates its call to the Sabah State Government to amend the Sabah Conservation Enactment 1997 to include a provision holding private landowners accountable for the deaths of elephants on their land. In the meantime, SAM looks forward to the implementation of the 10-year Sabah Elephant Management Action Plan (2020-2030), which lays out clauses that would hold plantation workers and owners accountable for the death of elephants injured and killed on their land.

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