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Letter to Editor

20 April 2019

**TIME TO PROTECT, NOT DESTROY**

**In conjunction with Earth Day April 22nd this year, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) would like to highlight the fact that at least one-fifth of mammal species found in Malaysia is facing extinction.** That is according to a data provided by the World Bank in 2015, which revealed that in 2014 as many as 70 species out of 336 mammals were in danger. This special classification ranks Malaysia seventh in the world, while in Southeast Asia it is second only to Indonesia which counts 184 species at risk (the first in the world).

Malaysia is the most dangerous country in the world for species already at risk. The continuous emergence of wildlife news in the media warrants serious attention from the government and the relevant authorities. From snaring, roadkills, elephant wreaking havoc on villagers and destroying crops, primates at risk, killing of sunbears to consumption of turtle eggs, sale of wildlife through social media and the list goes on.

Elephants are seriously endangered because of endless human encroachment into their habitats. Once rampages occur in a village they are characterised as rogue elephants for intrusion into human space, when rightfully, the land was originally theirs. In cases of villagers, farms and plantations closing in on wild habitats, wildlife is always the losers.

In September 2016 the loss of seven Bornean pygmy elephants in a mud pool near a logging site in Rinukutoff the Kalabakan-Keningau road in Tawau is absolutely tragic. Their death is a huge blow to Sabah's conservation efforts to conserve the 1,500 or so remaining jumbos in its forests.

Death stalked the elephants again when in January 2017 on New Year's eve two tuskers were discovered dead in Kinabatangan believed to have been the work of people and poachers. One dubbed 'Sabre' for its crooked tusks was found with its tusks missing. He was believed to have been killed on November 21 2016.

In August 2017, a female pygmy elephant was found dead on a plantation just outside a forest reserve in the Kinabatangan area. The dead pachyderm was riddled with wounds from shotgun pellets and may have been shot for feasting on crops at a local plantation.

In the past seven years 22 baby elephants without their mothers have been rescued with half of these baby elephants dying as many cannot survive. They have become orphans because their mothers may have become victims of crimes committed by farmers and plantation workers. In recent years baby elephants have been found wandering around aimlessly without their mothers anywhere around.

Just recently two more pygmy elephants died near a plantation area at Sukau and Tawau.

While the crippling blow that the palm oil industry has dealt to the orangutan species is monumental, the palm oil industry has the blood of other species on their hands as well. Recognizing the high demand and high profits that are associated with palm oil, the industry has stopped at little to produce as much of this commodity as possible. Sadly, this high pay-off for palm producers comes at a high cost to the environment and animal species where palm oil is grown.

Our tiger population has dwindled to less than 150 animals with the population surviving throughout the Central Forest Spine in Peninsula Malaysia. As a commodity the tiger is shredded with vulture-like efficiency: skin, whiskers, penis, tail, bones and claws all parcelled up for open sale in markets throughout Asia.

Now that China is lifting the ban on rhino horns and tiger bones for use in traditional Chinese medicine even though they have no therapeutic value whatsoever, there will be devastating consequences for tigers globally. With a legal market, China is creating a huge legal market for poached animal parts. This move could be a death sentence for both rhinos and tigers. It will inevitably stimulate demand and the trafficking of such products. This will also provide ample opportunities for traffickers to launder their poached animal parts.

The carnage continues with turtles falling victims to the unscrupulous. The butchering of 100 endangered sea turtles in October 2017 on an island off Semporna has drawn worldwide attention with the discovery of the carcasses of the reptiles.

An estimated 100 turtle skeletons were found scattered in the bushes near the beaches of Kg Pantau-Pantau, Kg Amboh-Ambohang, Kg Sampolan at Pulau Bum-Bum off Semporna. These were believed to be poaching activities carried out by the nomadic Palau or Bajau Laut (sea gypsies) who come to the area occasionally.

Then again in October 2017, a group of islanders made another gruesome discovery of 7 turtle carcasses with their stomachs exposed, found floating in waters near Mabul Island.

Previous reports of the discovery of turtle carcasses have been reported off Sabah waters in the past years. Among them were: the discovery of 60 turtle carcasses on Pulau Tiga in Kudat made public by a researcher-lecturer in March 2014.

Barely a month after that, the carcasses of four more sea turtles were found floating off Semporna, between Bum-Bum and Kulupuan islands within the Tun Sakaran Marine park by a Fisheries Department staff.

Sharing similar fate are shark species where viral shark photos showed a number of sharks without fins on sale at a wet market in Sandakan. The public concern is whether such sharks that were caught without the fins fall under the endangered species.

Our very shy mammal – the pangolins – is going the way of the dodo. The Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce (TRAFFIC) warned of an impending disaster for our pangolins as over one million pangolins were poached in the last decade. TRAFFIC reported that about 23 tons of pangolins were seized in air transport between 2009 and 2017 and in 2018, 40.8 tonnes of pangolin products were seized. They are the top target for traffickers and poachers since they are perceived to be of medicinal value and their meat is a delicacy. Despite seizures and tip offs, the poaching crisis continues unabated.

The real tragedy is that the few species mentioned above do not begin to tell the story. The one thing that all of these species have in common is that the cause of their extinction is human beings. Human activity now impacts heavily everywhere and we are using a variety of sophisticated industrial technologies to destroy other life forms in vast numbers and this inevitably results in the extinction of some species.

In many cases these life forms are hunted to extinction as a result of some misguided commercial imperative. Whether it is for food (such as species of fish) raw materials (such as the ivory of elephant tusks) or some delusional belief in their aphrodisiac or medicinal qualities (such as the horn of a rhinoceros) they are killed with sophisticated technologies such as guns and fishing nets against which they have no evolutionary defense). An example sea turtles. All sea turtles are threatened due to the poaching and hunting of their shells, meat and eggs. It is the absurd belief that the eggs possess aphrodisiac elements.

Mainly two things that drive species over the edge are our systemic destruction of land habitat – forests, grasslands, wetlands, peatlands, mangroves in our endless effort to capture more wild places for human use (whether it be residential, commercial, mining, farming or military) and our destruction of waterways and the ocean habitat. There are now great floating garbage patches in several oceans of the world.

On an isolated limestone hill called Gunung Kanthan in the northwest of Peninsular Malaysia, it is the only known home to a new species of snail discovered. It is found in the corner of a limestone quarry run by global cement giant Lafarge.

Quarries that have yet to be blown apart to provide material for cement manufacture is a fertile place for species. They are source to three new kinds of plant, a trapdoor spider, snail and new kind of Bent-toed Gecko. Given the very restricted known distributions of these species, all of them are presumed to be at critical risk of global extinction, and all face threat from further quarrying.

Relatively speaking, we pay a lot of attention to big and colourful species but the species that are not heard of or less exotic need to be valued too. Frogs, which among other invaluable services from a limited human perspective, eat malarial mosquitoes, yet now mosquito populations are increasing as the frog populations declined. Even farmers have had to resort to using more chemicals in their fields to keep pests at bay, a job undertaken previously by hungry frogs.

Flying insects have really important ecological functions, for which their numbers matter a lot. Flies, moths and butterflies are as important as bees for many flowering plants, including some crops. They provide food for many animals, birds, bats, some mammals, fish, reptiles and amphibians. Flies, beetles and wasps are also predators and decomposers, controlling pests and cleaning up the place. But then there is no proper study carried out to determine the scale of the losses although destruction of wild areas and widespread use of pesticides and climate change are most likely factors.

Conservation NGOs have repeatedly warned that all these destructive activities have taken a serious toll on our wildlife yet little has been done in addressing the critical situation.

However not all our destruction is as visible as our vanishing rainforests and the iconic species that vanish with them. Far more common is our destruction of the soil with organic based pollutants associated with industrial chemicals. Thousands of synthetic chemicals often in the form of fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and other poisons destroy the soil by reducing the nutrients and killing the microbes, in which we grow our food. Such poisons cause depletion of the soil and the poisons also kill many of the beneficial insects, such as bees that play a part in plant pollination and growth.

Trade in wildlife is a growing criminal sophistication behind the current wildlife crime wave, with syndicates employing ruthless tactics to brutally slaughter rhinos, elephants and other animals.

The problem is not only confined to Malaysia alone but is happening throughout Asean member countries. The key priority to be addressed is whether there is some form of policy with a clear description of what actions will be taken and by whom, as well as firm commitments to ensure it can be implemented effectively. With wildlife so threatened, it is important to appreciate what may soon be gone and be reminded of the importance of protecting it.

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