



Sahabat Alam Malaysia
Friends of the Earth Malaysia
For Environmental Justice

1, Jalan Joki, 11400 Penang, Malaysia
Tel No: +604 827 6930
Fax No: +604 827 6932
Email: foemalaysia@gmail.com
<https://www.foe-malaysia.org>

Letter to the Editor

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PROTECT CRITICAL WATER RESOURCES TO ENSURE WATER SECURITY

In conjunction of World Water Day, which falls on 22nd March every year, Sahabat Alam Malaysia calls on the Malaysian government to protect critical water resources in Malaysia to ensure water security. This requires classification of permanent reserved forests for protection purposes, proper management of wetlands in Malaysia and intensifying efforts to harvest rain-water.

This year's theme, 'Nature for Water', explores nature-based solutions to the water challenges we face in the 21st century. The central message is that nature-based solutions such as planting trees to replenish forests, reconnecting rivers to floodplains, and restoring wetlands, is a sustainable and cost-effective way to help rebalance the water cycle, mitigate the effects of climate change and improve human health and livelihoods.

The Eleventh Malaysia Plan recognises forests as the nation's natural capital due to the ecosystem services they provide. This can be exemplified by the importance of the Forest Reserves in the Ulu Muda, Kedah which serves as an important water source for the states of Kedah, Penang and Perlis, supplying 96%, 80% and 70% of the respective states daily water needs.

When logging affects the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve (UMFR) as a water catchment area, not only economic activities in the three states are impacted, but the basic needs of water of more than 4 million people and the environment will be threatened.

A permanent reserved forest (PRF), until classified under Section 10, subsection (1) of the Forestry Act 1984 is deemed to have been classified under Section 10(1) paragraph (a) as timber production forest under sustained yield. Failure to classify the PRF means that States can issue permits to take forest produce from the PRF, hence threatening its ecosystem services.

In fact, the UMFR scenario where logging and mining activities have been approved, is reflective of the need for a uniform national policy to protect forests in Malaysia as national water catchment areas.

Rivers are the main raw water resources in Malaysia. In Peninsular Malaysia, the major rivers flow from the Main Range of Titiwangsa that form the backbone of the peninsula.

The major rivers that flow towards the Straits of Malacca include Sungai Muda, Sungai Perak, Sungai Bernam and Sungai Linggi, while Sungai Pahang, Sungai Rompin and Sungai Kelantan flow towards the South China Sea. The sources of all these rivers are inevitably enveloped in tropical rainforests that catch water for the rivers.

Under the Constitution, the governance and protection of the rivers, as raw water resources, come under the jurisdiction of state governments. Classification of forests as soil protection forest, flood control forest, and water catchment forest are crucial to protect water resources.

However, when it comes to the governance and protection of the forests that catch water for the rivers, very few states have passed state enactments. In Penang, a total of 62.9 sq. km of forests have now been gazetted and protected as water catchment areas.

Other states appear to be reluctant to pass similar laws, possibly due to potential losses in revenue from premiums, royalties from logs and other forest products.

Sustainable Development Goal 6 commits the world to ensuring that everyone has access to safe water by 2030, and includes targets on protecting the natural environment and reducing pollution. Hence Malaysia's rainforests must be protected as national raw water catchment areas to protect water supply for the people.

We thus strongly urge that the power of protecting critical water catchment areas to be brought under the Federal legislative powers as opposed to the state. The rationale for this proposed new legislation is if the rainforests are destroyed, the rivers will eventually run dry, causing a water supply crisis. If there is a water supply crisis, it will be a national crisis that will affect millions of people and disrupt all economic activities and sustenance.

Rain water which is an accessible sustainable water resource is an important component in attaining water security. In this context, protecting the forests, rivers and wetlands which are natural water catchments should be regarded as a national interest issue that should be acted upon immediately.

S.M. MOHAMED IDRIS

President

Sahabat Alam Malaysia