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Letter to Editor

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Sacrificing our pygmies for palm oil

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) is shocked to learn of the death of six more pygmy elephants which has been happening ad nauseam for several years.

Elephants are not an exception because the carnage to turtles and sharks has been making headlines in the previous year, which is reflective of poor government protection. That the slaughter is happening frequently can only mean that those entrusted with the task of protection are not doing enough. So far those responsible for the kills have not been charged, and the cause of deaths of the pygmies and others have yet to be established. Most killings end with unresolved investigations.

Knowing how critically endangered the pygmy elephants are, the stakes for this species' survival are too high for incidents of this sort to happen again. The same can be said for the many other animal species who are currently fighting to survive in Sabah plagued by palm oil production. While the palm oil industry's crippling blow to the orangutan species is monumental, the industry has the blood of other species on their hands as well.

The news of death of these elephants has put a huge negative spotlight on Sabah. Sadly Malaysia is sacrificing its elephants for palm oil.

Recognizing the high demand and huge profits that are associated with palm oil, the industry has stopped at nothing to produce as much of this commodity as possible. With the expansion of deforestation and proliferation of palm oil plantations, elephants are finding it difficult to find food and thus are forced to feed on the fruits of the palm oil plant.

Considered as pest or threat to palm oil production, they are subjected to the retribution of palm oil producers. Every year, elephants are found either shot dead, or poisoned, across Sabah's elephant home ranges, though the public often hears nothing about it.

It is clear that the previous government had not taken any immediate, effective action to prevent the future deaths of pygmy elephants or to hold those accountable for the elephant deaths. Moreover it does not have the political will to adopt more drastic actions affecting big logging companies and plantations. Though an action plan has been developed for conservation of the Bornean elephant, implementation has been seriously wanting.

There is a glimmer of hope now that the government has changed hands and SAM is delighted to learn of the actions of Chief Minister Datuk Seri Panglima Haji Mohd Shafie in taking the necessary and appropriate action to stop more unnecessary deaths to Sabah's wildlife species. It is indeed a step in the right direction.

To save pygmy elephants, the forest of Sabah must be restored. At the very least, wildlife corridors must be created to allow elephants to move from one fragmented patch of forest to another, preventing them from becoming trapped in a forest island. Other measures include curbing palm oil plantations and creating more national parks.

SAM calls on the Government and the Wildlife authorities to take concrete and immediate action to prevent more untoward deaths of Sabah's precious wildlife as this is a matter of utmost public interest that warrants the highest level of priority.

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