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Letter to Editor

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National Forestry Policy must lead to legal protection and rehabilitation of forests

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), in response to the National Forestry Policy announced by the Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin yesterday, calls on all state governments to ensure actual implementation of the policy that leads to real protection, conservation and rehabilitation of Malaysia's forests **through the gazetting of more forests as totally protected forests which cannot be converted for other uses or disturbed by destructive activities such as logging.**

This is most urgently needed in order to ensure the survival of all life, including our rich biodiversity, as well as to address climate change and ensure the sustainability of our water resources.

We strongly support the PM's call to the state governments to step up their efforts to gazette and maintain the forested areas, especially in the Central Forest Spine (CFS) and the Heart of Borneo ecological corridors. These forests must indeed be gazetted as totally protected forests.

We also urge the protection of all environmentally sensitive areas that are critical for the sustainability of our biodiversity, water resources and for addressing climate change. This must also go beyond the CFS and the Heart of Borneo as well as the Malayan tiger habitat areas.

In 1990, Malaysia reported that it had some 19.4 million hectares. In 2018, this figure had decreased to 18.3 million hectares. To put it briefly, in a span of less than 30 years, Malaysia had lost around 1.1 million hectares of forested areas. Consequently, our forest cover percentage in relation to the country's total land size, declined from 59 per cent in 1990 to only 55 per cent in 2018.

However, the 55 per cent number does not mean that all our forests are protected from destructive production activities such as logging as well as future conversions. This is our concern. Forested areas in Malaysia can be [classed](#) into several categories and sub-categories, in accordance with the legal protection granted unto them. Gazetted forests must be distinguished from state land forests that have yet to be gazetted and are far more susceptible to the threats of land use conversions.

Our analysis shows the country still had [3.9 million hectares](#) of such **state land forests** in 2018.

Meanwhile, the largest class of forests in this country is classified as **forest reserves** that have been gazetted under the forestry laws in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. In 2018, this covered an area of [12.7 million hectares](#). However, a significant size of these forests is in fact categorised as **production forest where operations such as logging and monoculture plantations can be carried out within them.**

Then, there are the totally protected forests that have been gazetted under various conservation laws in the country which are often termed as national park, state park, wildlife reserve or other suchlike terms. *A Master List of Protected Areas in Malaysia*, a 2019 publication by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (KETSA), with its content updated up to 2016, estimated that the size of totally protected terrestrial forests

and areas in Malaysia was only at [4.4 million hectares](#).

So, while Malaysia may claim that 55 per cent of its land area was under forest cover in 2018, the fact is, only 13 per cent of our total land area has been gazetted as totally protected forests and areas, where destructive activities or forest conversions are strictly prohibited within them.

Hence, we should not simply laud our success of maintaining at least 50 per cent forest cover, when what we need to ensure is the **complete protection of our forests from destructive activities and conversions.**

Consequently, we also agree with the PM that more financial resources are needed in addition to the Malaysia Forest Fund (MFF), which will be channelled to the states for conservation efforts, including the undertaking of social forestry in improving the socio-economic status of the Orang Asli and the local communities. Also critical in this regard is for the state governments to recognise the rights of indigenous peoples and their role in being custodians of the forests.

It is vital for the trend in forest loss to be halted immediately. Otherwise, there may be a time sometime in the future, when Malaysia may no longer be able to claim on its success in fulfilling the ‘50 percent forest cover’ pledge at the international stage.

In Peninsular Malaysia, the size of its forested areas fell from 6.3 million hectares in 1990 to 5.8 million hectares in 2018. Meanwhile in Sarawak, the size of its forested areas declined from 8.1 million hectares in 2005 to 7.8 million hectares in 2018. It was only in Sabah that the trend showed an increase, from 4.4 million hectares in 2005 to 4.8 million hectares in 2018.

One of the threats against forests in this country is the degazetting of forests for the purpose of land use conversions. In Peninsular Malaysia, the degazetting of any parts of its Permanent Reserved Forests (PRF) is typically done by the state governments without replacing the same size of area in another forested area, although this is actually required under the National Forestry Act 1984 and there are in fact available state land forests that can be used for this purpose.

Based on our research, the degazetting of the PRF in Peninsular Malaysia also affects high conservation value forests. These include the Virgin Jungle Reserved Forest; PRF areas that harbour endemic species of flora and fauna as well as threatened species under the listing of the *International Union for Conservation of Nature* (IUCN); and those that contain unique ecosystem features. All such PRFs must continue to exist and be conserved.

Compounding the matter, since the 1990s, the development of monoculture plantations has also been allowed in forested areas in this country, including within gazetted production forests. We believe around [3.3 million hectares](#) of forested areas, almost the size of Pahang, which includes both gazetted production forests and state land forests, have been designated as monoculture plantation zones, although not all of these areas have already been developed. This is in fact a conservative estimation, as we did not manage to access particular information on state land forests in Sarawak.

In Peninsular Malaysia, there are proposals to develop monoculture plantations within the PRF that may affect wildlife corridor areas, especially the habitat and roaming areas of large mammals such as elephants and tigers, and the ecological network of the CFS that has been identified under the National Physical Plan. All over the country, the development of monoculture plantations has affected and will affect the customary territories of our indigenous communities.

Furthermore, in Peninsular Malaysia, there are also other activities and land use conversions within the PRF that involve quarrying, mining - including recently, the proposal to mine rare earths, and agriculture. Quarrying, mining, agricultural and other land use activities within the PRF will adversely impact the biodiversity of our forests and our ability to achieve the fundamentals of sustainable forestry management.

Taking into consideration the reality of our forests, beyond the argument of ‘50 percent forest cover’, we would like to urge that the following recommendations be implemented as soon as possible.

First, state governments must be made to replace each forested area that has been or will be degazetted.

Second, forestry, conservation area and wildlife conservation laws in existence across the country must be amended to make a consultation process mandatory, in the event of any proposal to degazette any class of a gazetted forest. This has already been done under the forestry enactment of Selangor, and its example must be followed by all.

Third, forestry policy that promotes monoculture plantations must be revoked. Thus far, a large part of our forested areas that have been designated as monoculture plantations in actual fact has yet to be developed. Therefore, we still have time to correct the situation and choose to do the right thing.

Fourth, state governments must also not allow the approval for mining and quarrying activities within the PRF.

Fifth, all areas that have been recognised as environmentally sensitive areas under the national and state physical plans, must be gazetted, in order to ensure their protection. Among others, this will ensure that any development or land use change proposal within highlands above 1,000 metres will not be approved, which will serve to avert more natural disasters and ecological destruction.

Sixth, the enforcement actions against any encroachment and illegal land development activities on forested areas, including within the CFS in Peninsular Malaysia, must be improved.

Seventh, SAM also would like to urge the federal government to speed up its efforts in acquiring more international funds to supplement the MFF to help support the states in protecting and conserving their forests.

Forests are extremely valuable ecosystems; they provide us with our water supply systems, stabilise the climate we live in and conserve biodiversity resources that are important for sustainability. The Covid-19 pandemic has also taught us that if we continue to destroy forests and abuse wildlife for our own self interests, in the end, human all over the world may continue to be threatened by zoonotic diseases in the future.

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