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Letter to Editor

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LACK OF POLICY COHERENCE IN PROTECTING BIODIVERSITY

22nd May is the International Day for Biological Diversity.

Malaysia, is a party to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, and is one of the most megadiverse countries, ranking 12th in the world, according to the National Biodiversity Index, that is based on estimates of the country's richness and endemism in relation to some classes of plants and animals.

If we are proud of this rank, then we must do something to urgently address what appears to be a serious lack of policy coherence among our topmost decision-makers and agencies in protecting our biodiversity and forests.

The federal agency responsible for advancing our National Biodiversity Policy and National Forestry Policy (aimed at ensuring biodiversity/forest protection and their sustainable use) is the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (MENR).

However, it is this same ministry that is also responsible for advancing the new National Mineral Industry Transformation Plan 2021-2030 (TIM 2021-2030), launched on 22nd April by Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin.

According to media reports, MENR's Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Shamsul Anuar Nasarah was reported as saying that the country is set to become an important hub for the development of the mineral industry, with TIM managing the industry so as to make it a "new source of wealth" for the nation.

The Minister, did however acknowledge, that "in the rush to explore the potential of these minerals, the mineral industry is also seen as an industry that causes a lot of damage to the environment, the country's biodiversity system and the wellbeing of the local community."

Despite the assurances that such mining will not take place in environmentally sensitive areas (ESAs) such as to impair our forests and biodiversity, our concern is that it is precisely in these areas where such mineral resources exist, given the nation's previous history of mining and extraction.

The notion of 'sustainable' mining is an oxymoron, and is misleading, as such activities will always have serious negative impacts in areas where mining or any other commercial activities should not be allowed in the very first place.

ESAs including forest reserves and biodiverse-rich areas should be NO-GO zones and protected from any incursions.

Mining activities also burden us further with the generation of dangerous toxic, hazardous, and chemical

wastes for generations to come.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia's concerns are not without basis. Already, we know of companies who intend to carry out mining in existing forest reserves in Pahang.

One company from East Malaysia is reported to have been given a new mining lease recently in an area measuring approximately 1,200 hectares (3,000 acres) at Hutan Simpan Bukit Ibam, Keratong, Rompin, in Pahang.

Any approval for such mining leases has to come under the purview of the Mineral and Geoscience Department (JMG) under the MENR. How can approvals be given for mining in forest reserves?

The right hand and the left hand seem to be at odds in contradictory moves, exposing policy incoherence. Clearly, the possibility for conflicts and competition between policies is real.

Our real fear is that once again, the profit motive from the mining industry will trump biodiversity and forests concerns, whose conservation value cannot be monetised but are invaluable nevertheless, due to the ecological functions they perform.

Our leaders should not simply laud our success of maintaining at least 50 percent forest cover, when what we need to ensure is the complete protection of our forests and biodiversity from destructive activities and conversions.

Hence, policy coherence is vital. Allowing trade-offs between mining and other private commercial interests against the public interest of protecting forests and biodiversity, is not only being policy incoherent, but is also being short-sighted.

It also undermines the long-term sustainability of the nation in terms of the future of our water resources, the ability to combat climate change and in maintaining healthy ecosystems that enable a good quality of life for our continued existence, which are also necessary for maintaining jobs and livelihoods as well.

It is about time that we realise that we have reached the limits of what Mother Earth can take, and if we continue to ignore these warning signs and limits, we will face environmental calamities which will be hugely costly, both in human and economic terms.

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