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Letter to the Editor

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Be consistent: Malaysia's one step forward, one step back in forestry management

In conjunction with the International Day of Forests, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) would like to highlight the importance of being consistent in our efforts on forest protection in this country, both at the federal and state levels.

We would like to begin by applauding four important positive developments on forest protection in Malaysia in the last year. First, in September last year, Selangor decided to re-gazette 534 hectares of the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve that had earlier been de-gazetted in August. Second, in December, the 79th National Land Council (MTN) meeting agreed to implement a 15-year [moratorium](#) on the development of new monoculture plantations in the Permanent Reserved Forests (PRF) in Peninsular Malaysia. During the same month, the federal government also announced its [plan](#) to seek USD3 million from the Green Climate Fund (GCF) to support the development of a national adaptation plan for climate change. Then, during the parliament's first session in 2022, [amendments](#) to the National Forestry Act 1984 were finally tabled which among others, included making public consultations mandatory in any proposed forest degazetting exercise in the future.

These were all correct decisions that will help protect our remaining forests and support climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. Unfortunately however, the good that these wise decisions may be able to do can easily be compromised by a number of avoidable and poor decisions that contradict them. For every far-sighted decision that has been made in the last year that can ensure the greater protection of forests, we can find another decision in the opposite direction that entails forest destruction and degradation. One step forward followed by one step back does not lead us anywhere. To that effect, consistency in our forestry management is key, whether at the federal or state level.

To date, Selangor has yet to re-gazette parts of the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve, after six months of promising to do so. It was only last week that the *Pertahankan Hutan Simpan Kuala Langat Utara* (PSHKLU) coalition, of which SAM is a member, demanded that re-gazetting exercise is carried out immediately.

Then, on the moratorium on monoculture plantations in the PRF, total abolishment would in fact be the most effective decision. Why abstain from such forest conversions only for the next 15 years? Will climate change impacts lessen 15 years from now? What is the basis for limiting the moratorium to 15 years? Additionally, Malaysia also remains committed to continue the RM1.5 billion [loan](#) for the development of timber tree plantations, which continue to be misleadingly referred to as forest plantations.

Amid all these, on February 23, the [media](#) reported on massive forest conversions in Pahang, second only to Kelantan in magnitude. The article also raised the issue of the possible abuse of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) process, in which it was alleged that some plantation companies may have divided the size of their projects to not exceed 500 hectares. For a monoculture plantation project between 100 and 500 hectares in size, the EIA process does not require mandatory public consultation.

Such an attempt to avoid the EIA process is not a new matter. State governments must be held responsible in failing to ensure that such manipulation does not take place. There is simply no excuse for states not to be aware of it. While we try to move forward to amend the forestry law to enforce mandatory consultations, at the same time, our existing consultation spaces can easily be circumvented through sheer manipulation.

Although we believe that forest conversions should be put to a stop in this country, the threshold of 500 hectares for a monoculture plantation project to undertake an EIA process with a mandatory public participation is a decidedly high one. All forest conversions and monoculture plantations must be made to undergo an EIA process with a mandatory public participation process.

Imagine, living next to a 459-hectare timber tree plantation and not having the right to know more about the project? How can local communities effectively voice their objections if accessibility to information is a challenge? For indigenous communities, the situation may even be worse, such projects can even take place within their customary territories.

In the past year, we have also had to witness several floods, landslides, logjams and mudflows, in particular during the last monsoon season. From rural Kedah to rural Pahang, across the most urban parts of Selangor, these natural disasters have their roots in rampant deforestation and the failure in planning. If state governments continue to allow forest conversions despite our international commitments on forests, biodiversity and climate change; and elements of the plantation sector continue to disrespect the law and community rights, how can international climate funds be sufficient to protect us from future climate impacts?

Therefore, on this important day for forests, we would like to call for the federal and state governments to be consistent in their efforts to protect forests and address the impacts of climate change. We cannot afford to pretend to move forward when in reality, we are still staying at the same precarious spot. In the era of climate change, this is akin to just waiting for disasters to happen.

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