



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 Editor

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PROTECT ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE AREAS

It is World Environment Day (WED) on Sunday, June 5. The 2022 WED campaign #OnlyOneEarth calls for collective, transformative action on a global scale to celebrate, protect and restore our planet.

Malaysia, which is blessed as being one of the 17 mega-biodiverse countries in the world according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), must do its part to protect its forests, biodiversity and nature.

However, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), is gravely concerned that despite the existence of various national policies including on forests, biodiversity and the National Physical Plan (NPP), it appears that decisions are being made without respect for these policies.

Activities which should not be allowed in the first place in such environmentally sensitive areas (ESAs) are being permitted. Among these activities include those which are labelled as 'sustainable mining' and mega land reclamation projects in ESAs.

The ESAs are clearly mapped in the NPP and have been agreed to by both the federal and state governments and they have been assigned rankings to limit what activities are allowed and what are not.

The disrespect for the NPP is clearly apparent in relation to the latest controversial lanthanide mining project in Mukim Kenering, Daerah Hulu Perak, close to Gerik, which involves an area of over 5,000 acres and includes the Central Forest Spine and areas classified and ranked as ESA rank 1.

How such a project can be allowed by the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (MENR) is mind-boggling, especially when it is this same ministry that is responsible for the protection of our forests and biodiversity.

Clearly, there does exist a conflict of interest in MENR which is promoting the mining of natural resources on the one hand and on the other, the protection of forests and biodiversity.

Under the National Forestry Policy and the National Biodiversity Policy, the forests involving the Central Forest Spine are supposed to be protected. We are also most perplexed as to how the Department of Environment (DOE) approved the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the lanthanide project in an ESA 1 area.

A site with an ESA 1 ranking under the NPP prohibits development, agriculture or logging except for low-impact nature tourism activities, research and education purposes.

The claim by the minister of MENR recently that lanthanide is a non-radioactive rare earth element which dismissed SAM's grave concerns has totally missed the point. The proposed activity has a high risk of increasing the concentrations

of ammonium and thorium in the existing environment. Already the naturally occurring radioactive thorium (Th-228) of a tested soil sample from one of the land parcels reported in the EIA is above the 1 Bq/g, which subjects it to laws relating to radioactive material management.

The lanthanide ore by itself may not be radioactive, but the process of its mining and beneficiation will increase the concentration of naturally occurring thorium in the area. This must raise grave concerns and not be dismissed willy-nilly.

Further, the justification given in the EIA that “the areas will remain green” and “no changes of land use from green to mining is needed” is also grossly misleading and baseless.

First, the proposed project in Perak involves the construction of 7 hydro metallurgical plants for the mining (involving an area of 40.7 ha in total). Second, according to a study on the China's ion-adsorption rare earth resources, mining consequences and preservation, although in-situ leaching does not require clearing of vegetation and forests or the removal of topsoil, about one-third of the vegetation is still cleared and significant amount of drilling slurry is produced.

The practice of in-situ leaching in China has revealed serious environmental problems including underground water contamination, mine collapses and landslides. More than 100 landslides reported in Ganzhou region were attributed to in-situ mining and leaching practices, at significant human costs and losses of ion-adsorption rare earth resources.

Despite such grave findings, once again, the rationale appears to be the need for new sources of revenue at the expense of the environment and sustainability.

When will we ever learn that we cannot afford anymore to continue sacrificing the environment for the sake of short-term profits while undermining our sustainability in the longer-term?

If the federal and state governments themselves do not respect the policies that are meant to protect our ESAs and the environment, who will then?

When will we say that enough is enough and stop plundering the environment for the sake of the promise of billions?

We cannot go on making such trade-offs between the economic and environmental imperatives.

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

We need to reflect deeply and reverse its course so that we protect and restore our ESAs, and not allow them to be plundered.

Meenakshi Raman
President
Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM)