



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press Statement

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Flying Foxes: Nature's Unsung Forest Guardians in Decline

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) is alarmed by recent reports on the sharp decline of flying foxes and fruit bats, in Sabah. These often-misunderstood creatures are vital to the health of our forests and the sustainability of our ecosystems. Their decline should concern not only environmentalists, but all Malaysians whose livelihoods and well-being are tied to healthy forests and agricultural systems.

Flying foxes are among nature's most effective pollinators and seed dispersers. As they forage over long distances each night, they transfer pollen from flower to flower and disperse seeds far from parent trees through their droppings or discarded fruit. Many rainforest species, particularly those with large seeds that cannot be spread by wind or smaller animals, depend almost entirely on flying foxes for reproduction.

In areas degraded by logging, deforestation or forest fires, flying foxes play a crucial role in ecological restoration. By introducing seeds into cleared or damaged land, they accelerate natural forest regeneration and restore plant diversity. This in turn supports wildlife habitats and strengthens ecosystem resilience. Without flying foxes, forest recovery would be slower and less diverse, with long-term ecological consequences.

Malaysia is rich in bat diversity. Peninsular Malaysia alone is home to about 110 recorded bat species, including some 50 cave-roosting species. The large flying fox (*Pteropus vampyrus*), one of the largest bat species in the world, provides ecological services with far-reaching impact. The trees they pollinate produce fruits and seeds that feed birds, mammals and insects, sustaining entire food webs.

Flying foxes are also essential to the durian ecosystem. Research by Malaysian conservation biologist Dr. Sheema Abdul Aziz, founder of the Rimba research group, has identified flying foxes and nectar bats as key pollinators of durian flowers. As bats feed on nectar, pollen adheres to their fur and is transferred between blossoms, ensuring fruit production. Frugivorous bats further aid by dispersing durian seeds, contributing to forest diversity. Other important tropical plants, including *petai*, wild bananas, and mangrove trees such as *perepat* and *berembang*, also rely on fruit and nectar bats for pollination.

Despite their ecological importance, flying foxes are frequently vilified. Some farmers believe they damage fruit crops and view them as pests. However, scientific evidence shows that habitat loss poses a far greater threat to both bat populations and agricultural sustainability. Deforestation, land clearing and urban expansion are rapidly reducing their feeding and roosting habitats.

Flying foxes also face hunting pressure. They are killed for consumption, sold to specialty restaurants, and sought after due to unfounded traditional medicinal claims. Additionally, bats can become indirect victims of pesticide use when they feed on contaminated fruits or insects. Cave-roosting bats are further threatened by quarrying, habitat disturbance and unmanaged tourism activities.

Two native species, the large flying fox (*Pteropus vampyrus*) and the island flying fox (*Pteropus hypomelanus*), are classified as “Endangered” in the Red List of Mammals for Peninsular Malaysia (2017) due to significant population declines. Both species are listed under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which requires strict regulation of international trade. Efforts are underway to grant them “Totally Protected” status under Malaysian wildlife law, which would prohibit all hunting.

It is troubling that flying foxes continue to be portrayed as pests or disease carriers when in reality they are guardians of our forests and contributors to our food security. The narrative must shift from fear to informed understanding.

CAP calls for stronger enforcement against illegal hunting and the indiscriminate killing of bats, expedite implementation of “Totally Protected” status for endangered flying fox species, and comprehensive public education campaigns to dispel myths about their medicinal value. We also urge habitat restoration through the replanting of native trees, protection of roosting sites, and reduction in excessive pesticide use that harms wildlife.

Flying foxes are indispensable environmental stewards. Through pollination and seed dispersal, they promote forest regeneration, sustain biodiversity and enhance climate resilience. Their loss would bring serious ecological and economic consequences.

Protecting flying foxes is not merely about conserving a single species. It is about safeguarding the forests that support agriculture, regulate the climate and sustain life itself. Acting now to protect these forest guardians is an investment in Malaysia’s environmental future and the well-being of generations to come.

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