

Protect Ulu Muda from logging

THE report of continued logging activities in the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve, "Logging in Ulu Muda reserve should be halted" (*The Star*, March 9) is cause for alarm. The Green Living Special Interest Group of the Malaysian Nature Society supports the call by Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Penang Water Supply Corporation to terminate all logging and quarrying activities in the Ulu Muda forest complex immediately.

The 160,000ha forest complex, covering seven forest reserves, is a critical water catchment area for the northern states of Kedah, Perlis and Penang and supplies water to, among others, the Ahning, Muda (*pic*) and Pedu dams.

According to the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia, the Ulu Muda forest complex supplies as much as 96% of Kedah's, 50% of Perlis' and 80% of Penang's water.

The Kedah state government has been aware of the logging activities in the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve for years, and the Kedah Water Supply, Water Resources and Energy Committee had assured the public since last year that it would look into the issue of logging permits and the possibility of gazettement of the entire forest reserve as a water catchment area, "Kedah govt aware of logging activities in Ulu Muda reserve" (*The Star*, May 16, 2016).

The 2016 drought affecting the northern states of peninsular Malaysia was directly linked to logging activities in the Ulu Muda forest complex, which affected climate and water cycle patterns, resulting in a massive decline in dam water level and a postponement of the padi planting season.

In addition to providing water for domestic, industrial and agricultural use, Ulu Muda also provides vital ecological services such as climate regulation, soil erosion prevention, biodiversity conservation and maintenance of soil, water and air quality.

Without the root system of this rainforest complex to absorb and slowly release rainwater, heavy monsoon rains would end up washing over the exposed cleared forests, resulting in soil erosion, landslides, flash floods and the silting of rivers. Forest clearing releases stored carbon dioxide, which traps heat and contributes to atmospheric warming.



A fully-grown tree releases 1,000 litres of water vapour a day into the atmosphere. The reduced ability of a cleared or decimated forest to absorb solar energy and release water vapour leads to higher temperatures and a decline in rainfall. One can imagine the ecological fallout if logging were allowed to continue in Ulu Muda.

From a human dimension, Ulu Muda provides economic and sociocultural services which include ecotourism, the harvesting of forest products and a home for indigenous and rural communities.

The preservation of the Ulu Muda forest complex is a political issue and not merely the concern of environmental organisations. It affects the very survival and food and water security of a significant percentage of the population of peninsular Malaysia.

When the survival of present and future populations is at stake, apportioning blame to political parties and previous administrations is unproductive and downright harmful.

Malaysia stands to gain more economic benefits from keeping its forests intact and biologically diverse than from issuing permits for logging, mining and road construction in forested areas.

The economic benefits of logging are short-lived and can sustain only one to two generations at most. If the federal and state governments wish to cultivate long-term prosperity, they need to afford greater protection to rainforests, which are worth more alive than dead.

There is little point in governmental and municipal initiatives such as recycling and tree-planting campaigns, which smack of environmental tokenism, if state governments and the federal government are unwilling to cooperate to conserve and protect the Ulu Muda forest complex.

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