

Encroachment also causing Bukit Merah Lake to dry up

ILLEGAL ACTIVITY:
Bukit Merah peat swamps cleared to make way for crops

**M. HAMZAH JAMALUDIN
AND RAJA KHALIDATUL ASRIN**
BUKIT MERAH
news@nst.com.my

THE El Nino phenomenon is not the sole reason for Bukit Merah Lake to dry up.

There is another cause — encroachment on the lake's water catchment area.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) claimed that some 500ha of peat swamps near the lake had been illegally cleared and dried up to make way for cash crops and oil palm trees.

"These activities have been going on for many years. We have raised this issue before and have also brought the relevant agencies to visit the affected areas in 2013, but nothing much was done to tackle the problem," said SAM field researcher Meor Razak Meor Rahman here yesterday.

To prove his claims, Meor Razak had invited Bagan Serai member of parliament Dr Noor Azmi Ghazali to visit the encroached areas in Pondok Tanjung and Kampung Selamat here.

Meor Razak said the peat swamps had been gazetted as a protected zone, as they acted as a giant sponge that held water before it was released into the lake here.

Since most of the areas were flatlands, he said, the main water resource for the man-made lake came from the peat swamps.

He said the neighbouring Pondok Tanjung Forest Reserve, which was one of the lake's main water catchment areas, was also affected by development and agriculture projects.

"About 1,400ha of the forest reserve had also been degazetted in 2004 for the rearing of Boer goats," he said, adding that the decision had reduced the size of the forest reserve to about 8,000ha.

Meor Razak said researchers from



Bagan Serai member of parliament **Dr Noor Azmi Ghazali** (right) at Bukit Merah Lake. Pic by Shaiful Shahrin Ahmad Pauzi



Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) had raised the issue as early as 2001 when they saw the impact of development on the forest reserve, which covered 10,390ha when it was gazetted in 1913.

USM had also found that its flora and fauna had adapted to the harsh environment that alternated between the wet and dry periods.

With four streams and 10 tributaries traversing the Pondok Tanjung forest, he said, the area was listed as a forest catchment and environment-sensitive area under the Perak Structure Plan 2020 and Lembah Beriah Local Plan.

"It is an important water catchment for Bukit Merah Lake, the

main irrigation source for padi fields in Kerian district and Seberang Prai Selatan," he said, pointing at the almost-dry peat swamp near the lake.

He said most natural vegetation had died when the encroachers dug canals to dry up the swampy area.

"During the dry period, the area easily dries up as most of the original plants have been replaced with cash crops and oil palm trees. When it rains, the area can no longer act as a natural sponge to hold water, and that could cause flooding."

Meor Razak said the non-governmental organisation and locals had called for an end to logging in the Pondok Tanjung Forest Reserve as it was an important water catchment area for flood control and wildlife protection.

"Without the forest reserve and peat swamps, Bukit Merah Lake would be polluted by pesticide, fertiliser and silt from the plantations."

Noor Azmi said the authorities should take action against the encroachers.

"They should not be allowed to get off scot-free. Their action has affected the farmers in Kerian district who rely on water from Bukit Merah Dam."

He said 22,000ha of padi fields

and more than 200,000 people had been affected.

He also said the encroachers had thrown agricultural debris into the lake, which made it difficult for the dam to reach its original storage capacity.

State Public Utilities, Infrastructure, Energy and Water Committee chairman Datuk Zainol Fadzi Paharudin said agencies, including the Forestry Department, must take action against the culprits.

On the controversial project that involves the degazetting of the forest reserve, he said the state government made the decision after getting feedback from agencies and experts.

"If it is the main reason, then we should be facing the same problem every year. The El Nino phenomenon is worse this year and that is why we are having this problem (at Bukit Merah Dam)."

Zainol said the state government would not make any decision without consulting the relevant agencies and experts.

He also refuted claims that cloud seeding had failed, saying it had helped produce rain here, increasing the dam's water level from 6.1m last Monday to 6.3m yesterday.