

Peat swamps' uncertain future

BUKIT MERAH: The role of peat swamps in Kerian district is undeniably important for the ecosystem here but their fate remains uncertain.

The biggest peat swamp is in the 7,164ha Pondok Tanjung forest reserve, but, unfortunately, it has yet to be gazetted as a water-catchment area.

State Forestry Department director Datuk Roslan Ariffin said authorities had to consider the economic impact if the peat swamp area was gazetted as a water-catchment area, which meant it could not be used for development.

"The state has 159,000ha of water-catchment areas. We must take into consideration the economic implication before we make such a decision," he told the *New Straits Times*.

He said the department would conduct a study on the impact of the decision on people in the area.

He refuted claims that illegal logging and encroachment had occurred in the Pondok Tanjung forest reserve.

He said the department would not support any application to degazette the protected forest after 1,400ha of it were allocated for goat rearing in 2004.

Apart from peat swamps in the forest reserve, there are also hundreds more outside, most of them in the Bukit Merah Lake reserve.

When asked about the peat swamps outside Pondok Tanjung, the Forestry Department, Drainage and Irrigation Department and Kerian Land and District Office, however, claimed that they were not under their jurisdiction.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) field researcher Meor Razak Meor Rahman said the Forestry Department must propose that Pondok Tanjung forest reserve be gazetted as a water-catchment area under Section 10(1)(e) of the National Forestry Act 1984.

He said peat swamps in the lake reserve must also be included, since none of the agencies wanted to take responsibility for them.

He said based on studies conducted by Universiti Putra Malaysia, the peat swamps were divided into two areas — Pondok Tanjung forest reserve and Bukit Merah lake reserve — and covered 888ha as of 2009.

"The status of the peat swamps (near the lake) has been the bone of contention among government agencies since 2011.

"While the Kerian Land and Dis-

trict Office wanted to issue temporary occupation licence for agricultural activities, the Irrigation and Drainage Department disagreed as it would affect the fragile ecosystem."

In the past few years, he said, various parties had highlighted how exploitation of peat swamps would lead to sedimentation and siltation in the lake.

"Although encroachment has been reported since five years ago, no stern action was taken against the culprits," he said.

He claimed that about 500ha of peat swamps had been cleared and planted with cash crops and oil palm trees.

Meor Razak said everyone should support the move to protect the peat swamps, which acted as a buffer zone for Bukit Merah Lake, which has a surface area of 35 sq km.

SAM had on Sunday claimed that the El Nino phenomenon was not the sole reason for the drying up of Bukit Merah lake as encroachment in the water-catchment area was also a contributing factor.

The allegation has prompted Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Zambry Abd Kadir to visit the area and asked enforcement agencies to take stern action.