

Keep land along rivers in natural state, says expert

KUALA LUMPUR: River buffer zones must host native flora and function as habitats for fauna.

Water quality expert Dr Zaki Zainudin said this as he welcomed the proposal to have at least 20m of reserve land along rivers to counter pollution.

"The move is commendable. I hope the stakeholders will adhere to this directive if it comes into effect. The problem is while we have guidelines, many do not follow them."

He said the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry must ensure that they were not "bald".

"There is no use in having a buffer

if the natural habitat is destroyed. It doesn't function as a filter if it is bald," he told the *New Straits Times*.

Zaki said riparian zones prevented erosion and maintained riverbank stability.

He said they acted as natural filters that removed pollutants such as solids (from erosion), ammonia, nitrate, phosphate (fertilisers) and other substances, in surface runoff.

"From what I see on the ground, besides encroachment, riparian areas are destroyed and left

bald. I'm not sure whether this is due to ignorance or greed."

Zaki said the Drainage and Irrigation Department had published river reserve guidelines but they were not imposed in all states.



Dr Zaki Zainudin

He said Selangor was a good example of a state that observed the guidelines.

He said riparian areas that had already been encroached on or destroyed must be rehabilitated.

Due to the enormous scale of the destruction, he said it was not fea-

sible for the government to undertake the work.

Instead, he said, those who were responsible for destroying or encroaching on riparian land should be required to restore them.

Fisheries Development Authority of Malaysia (LKIM) chairman Datuk Irmohizam Ibrahim also welcomed the proposal.

He said it was a good decision to focus on protecting the ecosystem as it would automatically improve aquaculture in rivers.

"This helps to protect all types of fish in our rivers. It will filter pollutants and improve the health of

the river."

Irmohizam added that the ministry should work with the National Fishermen's Association.

"Engaging with them is the key. Their feedback will be vital in implementing the proposal as they utilise the rivers daily," he said.

Irmohizam said fishermen, such as those who breed patin and tilapia in Sungai Pahang, were known as *nelayan darat* (land fishermen).

He said LKIM was ready to assist fishermen who were affected by last year's flood and patin breeders in Temerloh who had suffered losses during the recent drought.