

Applying NEM to Pulau Redang

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Comment

[New Sunday Times - 05/16/2010](#)

TURNING Pulau Redang in Trengganu into a five-star destination might not be a bad idea to attract high-end tourists to Malaysia.

Last year we chalked up a good number to our shores, and this island resort could be a new magnet for the exotic East.



Pulau Redang beaches beckon. Locals should have access to their own natural heritage just like the tourists

But we can also learn a thing or two from another popular favourite island resort, Pulau Pinang, once known as the Pearl of the Orient. Now it seems its pearly lustre is gone. Some tourists have sworn not to return unless something is done about it.

Unfortunately, some things just cannot be restored. A recent encounter with a Tourism Malaysia officer revealed that the Pearl of the Orient is now noted, among a handful of islands, with waters which are not safe to swim in.

The reason is due to the alleged population of jellyfish in the sea close to its shores. With the murky water, it is even more difficult to spot the sea creatures, which can prove to be a health hazard.

As it turns out, the five-star resorts lining the beaches of Batu Ferringhi have a lesser rating system to ensure that the sea is unpolluted.

At the same time, the upkeep of the beaches leave much to be desired as reported recently. The net result is that Penang is at a tipping point of losing its reputation as a beach resort, let alone recovering its once crystal clear waters.

Penang is now facing stiff competition from other beaches in Malaysia.

Batu Ferringhi is now crowded with so-called five-star "paradises" that perch precariously on once lush hills and forest.

Soon these "paradises" will face the same fate as the beach as the jungles are made even more vulnerable after human interference.

Some 40 years ago, when there were plans to construct the first seafront high-class hotel at the then pristine beach of Batu Ferringhi, the public were against it! Students registered their protests. They foresaw the fading away of the Pearl of the Orient.

They argued that the beaches should be left alone, and the hotels built far away from the shore. Unfortunately, their voices fell on deaf ears, and that marked the start of the inherent problem we see today. It took several years to manifest itself by which time it is too late to do anything meaningful.

The lives of the fishermen who depend on the sea as their main source of income have been totally forgotten. Now they have been displaced, not necessarily for the better.

Locals and the public are deprived of the beaches that had served as a place for family outings before the hotels monopolised them.

Against this background, what would Pulau Redang look like decades from now? Can the ambitious project to attract high-class tourists be sustained? Or would they leave the island the moment it meets a fate similar to

Batu Ferringhi?

Redang will be in a worse position as an island with little economic life of its own vibrant enough to support other touristic activities. Already it has attracted about 160,000 tourists annually, and some have noted that too many can jeopardise the island's beauty.

Will the locals, who cannot afford five-star hotels — 80 per cent of Malaysians have a monthly income of RM3,000 or less, according to the New Economic Model (NEM) report — be deprived yet again of another pristine sea resort?

And only to have access to it when tourists have deserted it because of the inevitable unsustainable development.

Charity starts at home. Locals should have access to their own natural heritage just like tourists.

Hopefully, this time the voice of reason will prevail. While we understand and appreciate the need to develop tourism, locals must be guaranteed of the same standards and quality. After all, the way forward is not just a high-income economy, but also inclusiveness and sustainability. It is time we put them into practice.

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