

130 million years of Belum, let's keep it around longer

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Article

New Sunday Times - 07/13/2008

WHILE the G8 continues to make more promises on how to save the world, a Malaysian is putting his money where his mouth is.

Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal of the well-known EmKay group took the initiative to launch the Belum Rainforest Research Centre last week.

Unveiled by the Sultan of Perak, the centre is poised to be a beacon for sustainability in seeking new solutions to old problems. And why not?

Belum is one of the richest biodiversity areas in Malaysia. It lies in Perak, bordering Thailand.

Much of its 300,000 hectares of virgin rainforest have been left untouched for over 130 million years, awaiting to be discovered, befitting its name which translates into "the land before time".

In the Belum-Temengor Rainforest area alone, 3,000 species of flowering plants have been found, including the Rafflesia (*bunga pakma*), considered the world's largest flowering plant. Almost half of the eight local species of Rafflesia are endemic to this area. One was named *Rafflesia azlanii* after the sultan in 2003.

Worldwide, there are only 20 known species of Rafflesia, its flowers growing up to 100cm in diameter and weighing as heavy as 10kg.

Belum also houses 64 species of ferns, 62 species of mosses, 23 species of freshwater fishes and seven species of freshwater and land turtles that inhabit in and around the man-made lake, Tasik Temengor, which came about from the construction of the Temengor Dam.

Six species of palms and over 30 species of ginger, including new and wild ones such as *Zingiber raja*, have been newly discovered.

This is further enhanced by the presence of 14 of the world's reportedly most threatened mammals such as the Malaysia tiger and tapir, Sumatran rhinoceros, Asiatic elephant, gibbons and hornbills.

With the entire rainforest four times the size of Singapore, it is rather difficult to imagine what natural and biological treasures await to be discovered as God's gift to humans.

It is this generation's responsibility to ensure Belum remains sustainable for many generations to come.

The 2005 Belum expedition indicated the presence of hundreds of new mammals, birds, amphibians, insects and other fauna.

Herein lies the significance of the Belum Rainforest Research Centre, as not only a place to carry out research, but also to document and preserve what have been discovered.

This effort may take decades given the vastness of the place as well as the inaccessibility of the complex area. But we must begin today.

The threat of biopiracy is indeed very real and it will be rampant if there is no attempt to document and to preserve our natural heritage in this crooked world of "finder's keepers".

In fact, the need to gazette the entire area should be carried out as soon as possible, preferably together with the Temengor Forest Reserve so that both can co-exist as a single uninterrupted and pristine ecosystem.

More than this, it is also desirable to create a Transnational Park together with Thailand with a buffer zone, like that in the African continent, so that the wild animals can truly roam free.

But like the biopiracy of plants, poaching could be a problem unless security is seriously factored in the effort to preserve the park. The same goes for illegal logging.

Belum, which stands as one of the last remaining near-virgin rainforests in Peninsular Malaysia, must be protected at all cost, even if it means restricting access in terms of ecotourism. The analogy that comes to mind is that of a rare, invaluable and irreplaceable item of heritage on display.

At no time are such items being made accessible to just anyone, even in the name of tourism, except under

very tight security and surveillance arrangements.

Why must our invaluable and irreplaceable natural heritage be so openly displayed as though they are of no value at all?

Some thought must be given to this if the troves of treasures in our forest are to be kept for future generations. That's what sustainable development truly advocates. More so if the intention is to go beyond tourism into the emerging knowledge-based economy.

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