

Headline	Green lung under threat		
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Fight for forest

Environmentalists and the Orang Asli community are shocked by a proposal to degazette almost 97% of Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve in Selangor for a development project. They say if the plan proceeds, it will destroy biodiversity that includes endangered flora and fauna. >2&3



Looming risk:
The Temuan community in Kampung Orang Asli Busut Baru, rely on the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve in Kuala Langat and are fearful that any development at the forest will jeopardise their livelihood.
— Photo by FAIHAN GHANI/The Star

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Green lung under threat

Coalition rises to preserve Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve and ward off degazettement plan catastrophe

By SHALINI RAVINDRAN and EDWARD RAJENDRA
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ANOTHER forest reserve in Selangor is under threat of degazettement, which will cut down the presently protected 958ha to a mere 28ha.

If the state government proceeds with its proposal to degazette some 97% of the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve (KLNFR), it could mean total destruction of the forest and its biodiversity, which would adversely impact the indigenous people who rely on the forest.

Selangor Forestry Department placed a notice in a major daily on Feb 5 inviting stakeholders in the Kuala Langat district to voice their objections to the proposal within 30 days.

The public hearing is in accordance with the Public Inquiry (Selangor) Rules 2014 and the National Forestry Act (Adoption) Enactment 1985, which makes the exercise (placement of notice) compulsory before a forest reserve can be degazetted.

The notice that the forest could be degazetted for a mixed development project had caused shock waves among environmentalists as well as to the 2,000 Temuan Orang Asli community.



The Blue-tailed Bee-eater can be found in Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve.
— ZAHARIL DZULKAFLY



Faizal: If the development of KLNFR went ahead, it could release 5.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide.

who live off the forest.

Environmentalists cautioned that KLNFR, as a type of peat swamp forest, was an area of importance for biodiversity conservation for critically endangered flora and fauna such as Meranti Bakau, Malayan Sun Bear, Selangor Pygmy Flying Squirrel and the rare Langat Red Fighting Fish.

When contacted, Water, Land and Natural Resources Minister Dr Xavier Jayakumar, who is also Kuala Langat MP, said he would be meeting with the Orang Asli community to gather feedback before bringing the matter up with Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Amirudin Shari as it was a state matter.

Becoming a pattern

This is not the first time the state



Leela: The new degazettement proposal goes against the Selangor Structure Plan 2035 to maintain 32% of areas as forest reserves.

government is holding a public hearing prior to the degazettement of forest reserve since the Public Inquiry (Selangor) Rules 2014 was put in place.

In 2018, they proposed to degazette a 28.3ha land within the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in Gombak for a housing project.

While a public hearing with stakeholders following the objection period was called, there has not been any feedback since and it is unknown if the degazettement will go through.

In 2014, a hearing was held on the degazettement of 106.65ha of the Ampang Forest Reserve for the construction of East Klang Valley Expressway (EKVE).

In 2016, two hearings were held for the proposals to degazette 30ha of Sungai Puteh North and South Forest Reserves for the Sungai Besi-Ulu Klang Highway (SUKH) project, as well as 3.4ha of the Bukit Cherakah Forest Reserve for the Damansara-Shah Alam Elevated Expressway (DASH) project.

All three highways are now in



Balu: There is nowhere else in Selangor with peat swamps like the one at Kuala Langat North.

different stages of completion.

Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) conservation head Balu Perumal said these past incidents showed that Selangor Government was not interested in preserving the natural environment.

"What is their (the state authorities) motive in approving such a development at the expense of our natural environment?"

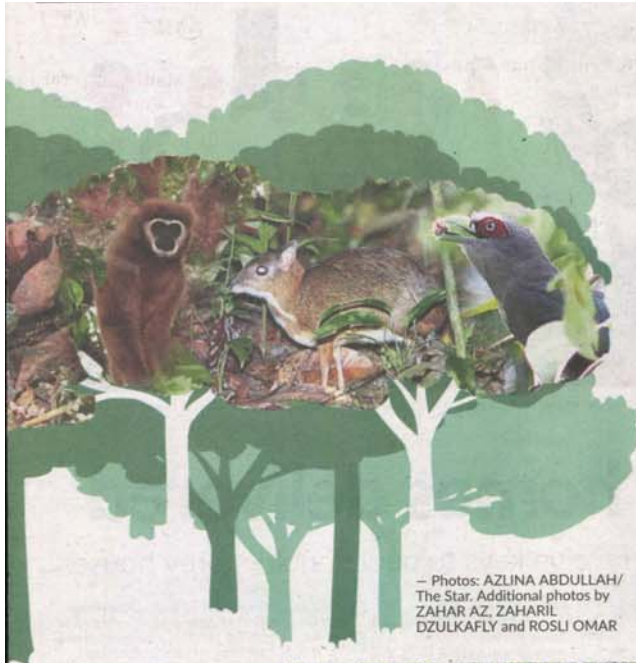
"The state government is fully aware that it cannot degazette a forest reserve even if it feels it is critical to do so, without first having identified a replacement green area of similar size and type in accordance with national policies for the degazettement of green areas.

"There is nowhere else in Selangor with peat swamps like the one at Kuala Langat North.

"Worse still, it is strange that a state government that claims to be environmentally sensitive is allowing this," he said, adding that the replacement of permanent forest reserves was specified in the National Land Code.

Treat Every Environment

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— Photos: AZLINA ABDULLAH/
The Star. Additional photos by
ZAHAR AZ, ZAHARIL
DZULKAFLY and ROSLI OMAR

Proposed degazettement of Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve



Special (TREES) director Leela Panikkar questioned the state's rationale of allowing such a proposal to go through when it clearly contravened its own planning documents.

"If this goes ahead, it will go against the Selangor Structure Plan 2035 to maintain 32% of areas as forest reserves.

"Even in the Kuala Langat Local Plan 2030, which was only gazetted last year, maintains the KLNFR as a forest reserve. So why is there a sudden need to change this?" she questioned.

Far-reaching impact

According to experts, the KLNFR comprising peatland and low land forest is estimated to be around 8,000 years old based on the depth and formation of the peat layers.

Global Environment Centre (GEC) director Faizal Parish said that what remained of the forest now was only a fraction of the originally gazetted forest reserve.

"KLNFR was gazetted in 1927 and it was about 8,000ha.

"Since then, about 90% of this has already been taken away for development and now the state government is planning to destroy what is left," he said.

Besides the expansive range of flora and fauna, he said the forest was an important ecosystem for climate control.

"Peatland is a type of land that stores 10 times more carbon per hectare sequestration compared with other tropical forest types.

"It functions as a natural terrestrial carbon store.

"So if the development of KLNFR went ahead, it could release 5.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, contributing to local as well as global warming and climate change problems," Faizal pointed out.

At the social level, he explained that degazetting the forest would undo all the work by the community and instil distrust towards the government.

"Many of the Temuan Orang Asli community had already been forced to relocate from the present KLIA site.

"After rebuilding their lives, now there is a threat that can take



Some 2,000 Temuan Orang Asli rely on the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve for their livelihood. — Photo courtesy of GEC 2020

away their livelihoods once again," he noted.

"In 2014, based on the state's direction, we helped to set up the Sahabat Hutan Gambut Kuala Langat Utara (SHGKLU) with the Orang Asli community to rehabilitate the forest and reduce risks of forest fire."

Faizal said that at the time, many blamed the Orang Asli for starting the fires as a means to clear the land. He stressed that the allegations were wrong and the Orang Asli were not responsible for starting the fire.

On the contrary, action by the Orang Asli community has significantly reduced the fires that have burnt a large area of the forest since 2012, and it led to forest recovery over the past five years.

An indigenous community nursery has also produced about 9,000 saplings for tree-planting activities in KLNFR to support the regeneration of the forest following the fires.

He said the Orang Asli community had so far rehabilitated 13ha of the degraded area by planting trees and more than 50ha of natural regeneration through water management and fire prevention.

Social activist Abdul Razak Ismail said deforestation of KLNFR would result in the Temuan people losing access to the forest to forage for food and traditional medicines besides erasing their

core identity and rituals carried out for generations.

"Selangor Government must understand that the Temuan use the forest reserve in a sustainable manner to hunt and forage for food.

"There are at least nine Temuan villages bordering the forest.

"The area being pushed for degazettement is roughly the size of 2,290 football fields," he said, revealing that information he obtained indicated that the degazettement purpose was for a mixed high-end development and sand excavation to support other developments.

He added that illegal sand mining had been ongoing based on complaints from the Temuan community but now the proposal to degazette the forest would be seen as approving that illegal act.

According to a senior officer at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, high-resolution satellite images showed that forest areas in Selangor have declined due to conversion to other land uses.

"Selangor Forestry Department's role in this matter is highly questionable.

"For the people, the department is seen as a protector of the forest but now it acts as a businessman who allows the forest to be degazetted with the aim of developing it and having a major sand mining pit," he said.



The Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve is estimated to be about 8,000 years old. — Photo courtesy of GEC 2020

Lack of transparency

To make their voices heard, MNS, GEC and TREES have formed the Coalition for the Protection of Selangor's Forests.

Joining them in the coalition are Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM), Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC) and Persatuan Aktivis Sahabat Alam (Kuasa).

The coalition has voiced dissatisfaction over the objection notice which stated that only stakeholders living in the Kuala Langat district can submit a formal objection.

"When the notice was placed, there was no other information made available, such as who were the developers behind the project and what was the justification for the project in the first place.

"Any proposal that calls for the destruction of a forest reserve not only affects

the surrounding stakeholders, but the entire state," Leela emphasised.

She said many people might have missed the notice that was advertised in the classified pages.

She also expressed concern about whether there was enough time as the public had to visit one of the two offices to view the map that was not published in the newspapers or posted on the Internet.

The public are also required to send their objections by traditional post as no email address was given.

The notice states that concerned parties can write to the Director, Selangor Forestry Department, Tingkat 3, Bangunan Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah, 40660 Shah Alam, Selangor to have their say on the issue.

Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve is home to diverse flora and fauna, including the Brown Marsh Frog. — ZAHARIL DZULKAFLY

