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Penang's green dream

NGOs and companies are stepping up to the plate with their own ecological initiatives to help the state government achieve its goal of planting 500,000 trees by 2030.



Natural protection: An aerial view of a mangrove forest in the northern part of Seberang Prai that protects the coastline. — Filepic



A helping hand: Flex Penang employees planting mangrove trees during a Cycling and Mangrove Planting Programme 2022 at Mangrove Forest Education Centre in Sungai Acheh. — ZHAFARAN NASIB/The Star

By IMRAN HILMY
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PENANG has been ramping up its tree-planting initiatives in line with the state government's mission to preserve forest areas.

And while it has been quite successful in planting tree saplings, mangrove forest replanting – which is vital to protect coastal areas rich with biodiversity – is proceeding at a much slower pace.

Under the state government's Green Agenda launched last year, Penang aims to plant 500,000 trees in total.

Penang Island City Council (MBPP) Landscape Department director Azizul Fahmi Muhamad said that as of April this year, a total of 103,951 trees had been planted across Penang island since 2008.

"To make the island greener, we have planted 68,905 trees from 2018 up to April this year," he said.

On Penang mainland, Seberang Prai City Council (MBSP) had planted 272,500 trees from 1990 to May this year, according to its secretary Baderul Amin Abdul Hamid.

"Over the past four years, we have planted 39,590 trees in several areas in Seberang Prai," he said.

Penang local government, housing, town and country planning committee chairman Jagdeep Singh Deo had reportedly said that hopefully by 2023, the state could plant 200,000 trees and reach its target of 500,000 trees by 2030.

Mangrove protection

However, while the general tree-planting initiatives are barrelling forward, the state government has not set any real targets for mangrove replanting.

According to MBPP, only 7,000 mangrove tree saplings were replanted from 2020 to May this year.

Azizul Fahmi admitted that MBPP had not set a target to plant new mangrove trees but stressed that efforts would continue in preserving the environment.

"We see the need to have more mangrove trees on the island.

"Mangrove forests protect the coastline

from storms, erosion and tsunamis, create new habitats for marine life such as fish, crabs, shellfish and other species, and encourage biodiversity.

"They help preserve the marine ecosystem," he added.

MBPP said Azizul Fahmi, had planted new mangrove trees in several areas in the Balik Pulau permanent forest reserve this year.

One reason for the slower pace of replanting is because of the nature of the mangrove plant.

Baderul pointed out that planting man-

groves was not as simple as planting other trees.

He said mangrove tree-planting needed to be carried out in suitable locations.

Mangroves generally grow on the coastal margins where land meets water.

"The Forestry Department will provide technical input on this matter.

"They will also monitor the mangrove forest in Seberang Prai," Baderul said, assuring that the council was committed to preserving the mangrove forest on the mainland.

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PENANG

Protecting state's coastal wetland areas

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"So far, we have planted about 2,000 mangrove trees over the past three years," he added.

Increasing forest size

Increasing the size of mangrove forests in Penang is part of the state government's policy.

Under Penang Structure Plan 2030 (PSP2030), the state government plans to gazette more permanent forest reserves, including environmentally-sensitive wetlands like mangrove forests.

This is especially timely as Penang's mangrove forests had decreased from 1,967ha in 2017 to 1,050ha in 2020, according to Forest Research Institute Malaysia's (FRIM) *Status of Mangroves in Malaysia* report that was published in 2020.

The threats to mangroves come from the extension of usable areas for settlements, agriculture and aquaculture.

Penang Forestry Department director Muhammad Ezhar Yusuf said the department welcomed the state's policy to plant more mangroves, highlighting that the initiative would increase the area of mangrove forests protected under the National Forestry Act 1984.

He said currently, only about 381ha of forested wetlands in Penang - 166.38ha in Balik Pulau and 214.66ha in Byram, Nibong Tebal - are protected as permanent forest reserves in the entire state.

This makes up only 7.07% of the state's total 5,386.77ha of permanent forest reserves.

Penang environment and welfare committee chairman Phee Boon Poh said the state government was committed to gazetting mangrove forest areas.

He said gazetting mangrove forest areas as permanent forest reserves was a key part of the state government's environmental management plan.

He noted that the latest area to be included under the state's permanent forest reserves was 161.8ha of aquaculture industrial zone (ZIA) in Penaga.

"The gazetting process of the ZIA is currently at the final stage," he said after attending the recent Penang Hill Biosphere Reserve (PHBR) Management Plan Workshop.

Green initiatives

To show their support for Mother Earth, various parties have come forward with their own green initiatives to increase the number of mangroves in the state.

Among them is multinational company Flex Penang, where some 100 of its employees participated in



Mangrove tree saplings need certain conditions for them to thrive. — ZHAFFARAN NASIB/The Star



Muhammad Ezhar says Penang Forestry Department welcomes the state's policy to plant more mangrove trees.



Phee says the gazetting process of the ZIA as a permanent forest reserve is at the final stage.

a Cycling and Mangrove Planting Programme 2022.

Flex Penang general manager Ng Sin Kiew said the half-day programme started with a cycling event at Pantai Ban Pecah in Kuala Kurau, Perak, followed by a mangrove-planting programme at Mangrove Forest Education Centre in Sungai Aceh, Nibong Tebal on the Penang mainland.

From as early as 7am, the participants were ready with their bicycles at Pantai Ban Pecah to cycle 10km along the Straits of Malacca, where they had also carried out a plogging event to clean up the beach.

After the cycling event, participants were brought to Mangrove Forest Education Centre in Sungai Aceh, which is about 15km from Pantai Ban Pecah, for a mangrove-planting session.

One of the participants, Angeline Maickle, 47, said it was both an interesting and

healthy programme.

"The plogging event during the cycling activity and mangrove-planting programme is a good way to contribute to the environment.

"They also serve to benefit our future generation," said the mother of three, who works as a trainer.

Another participant, government liaison executive Nur Aiezzah Atira Mohd Yusoff, 29, said the programme was excellent exposure for employees who were normally busy with their daily work at the factory.

Facility manager Loh Choon Eu, 36, said the programme would help improve people's understanding about protecting the environment, beginning with their surroundings.

The programme was carried out in collaboration with the Penang Environment Department (DOE), state Forestry Department and Penang Inshore Fisherman

Welfare Association (Pifwa).

Ng said some 1,000 mangrove trees were donated by the state Forestry Department, while another 1,000 trees were donated by Flex to be planted at Mangrove Forest Education Centre.

Ng added that the programme was held not only to commemorate World Environment Day but also to mark World Biodiversity Day and the International Day for the Conservation of the Mangrove Ecosystem.

Penang DOE deputy director Azman Shah Ismail congratulated Flex for organising the event and described it as a good awareness programme, especially in environment preservation.

Penang Forestry Department deputy director Tengku Mohd Ridzuan Tengku Ibrahim said the mangrove trees that were planted during the programme could be included in Malaysia's 100 Million Tree-Planting Campaign 2021-2025 as well, through its website www.100jutapokok.gov.my

The national 100 Million Tree-Planting Campaign 2021-2025, launched on Jan 1 last year, is part of the Greening Malaysia Programme.

Pifwa president Ilias Shafie said 30 private companies from various industries had collaborated with the association to plant mangrove trees.

"Since 1997, we have planted some 300,000 mangrove trees, but almost half of them had to make way for development.

"Now, we have only about 150,000 mangrove trees in Sungai Aceh and its surrounding areas in Balik Pulau.

"More effort is needed from all of us to protect them," he said.