

KERATAN AKHBAR



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Farmers at wits' end over jumbo issue

Headman: Villagers hoping for a solution from authorities to stop elephant encroachment

KOTA KINABALU: The villagers of Kampung Sukau and Kampung Menggol in Kinabatangan, about 380km from here, are almost at their wits' end trying to stop wild elephants from encroaching on their farms and oil palm smallholdings and destroying their crops. But keeping these jumbos away is no small task.

Sabah is well known for its Borneo pygmy elephant population and the location of human settlements close to their habitats is an open invitation for human-elephant conflicts.

Kampung Sukau and the nearby Kampung Menggol, inhabited by more than 2,200 people who are mostly farmers and smallholders, are no different.

Their crops get eaten up by the elephants that, by the time they are done with foraging, leave a trail of destruction behind them.

The recent discovery of three Borneo pygmy elephant carcasses in the space of five weeks in Sabah has raised concern over the conservation of this endangered species, found only in this part of the world.

At the same time, the wild elephants are a menace to villagers as they encroach on land belonging to the community.

Kampung Menggol headman Ibhoh Kifu said the villagers have no issue with the wild elephants but wish the authorities would come up with a workable solution to enable them to coexist harmoniously with the mammals, as well as with other



Trail of destruction: Ibhoh checking his oil palm tree which was destroyed by elephants at his plantation in Kampung Sukau. (Inset) A group of elephants searching for food near the village. — Bernama

wildlife that inhabit the forests close by.

"Our investments and hard work are gone in the wink of an eye when the elephants come," he said.

The villagers, he added, tried erecting a fence around their farms to keep the animals away but to no avail as the fence gets destroyed within minutes of an intrusion.

"It costs about RM4,000 to build a fence and each oil palm seedling costs about RM16. Can you imagine the losses when the elephants eat up the fruits of the trees planted on a three- to five-acre (1.2ha to 2.02ha) smallholding?" he lamented.

He, however, acknowledged that the presence of wild elephants in the area has attracted domestic and

foreign tourists to their village, which has given the locals an opportunity to generate an income from tourism-related activities.

He also urged tourism operators to help the villagers erect sturdier fencing.

Ibhoh, however, remains optimistic that the villages located in that area would eventually become

good models of how humans and wildlife can co-exist harmoniously, if all the parties concerned cooperate closely to work towards a win-win situation.

With wild elephants turning up as uninvited guests ever so frequently, a number of villagers have had close encounters with these huge creatures.

One of them, Shafie Abdul Karim, 33, who lives in Kampung Sukau and works as a security guard at a primary school, recalled that sometime early last year, he went out to inspect his father's oil palm smallholding at about 8.30pm after his neighbour informed him of the presence of an elephant in the area. He suddenly caught sight of an elephant moving about in search of food.

"When I shouted and clapped my hands in a bid to chase it away, it saw me and charged at me!"

Imagine an angry almost 3m-tall bull pygmy elephant charging towards you! Shafie panicked and fell into a small drain.

"I thought it would be the last day of my life ... because when I switched on my torchlight I saw the elephant standing there with one of its legs raised, ready to trample me!"

Using all his strength, Shafie heaved himself out of the drain and sped back to his house nearby.

These days, whenever he ventures into the smallholding, he would "rush back home the instant I smell the scent of the animal". — Bernama