



KERATAN AKHBAR

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Forests give water and water gives life

WE should all pay attention to the review of water management issues highlighted by Prof Datuk Dr Ahmad Ibrahim in his letter "Make water everyone's business" (*The Star*, April 20).

He covered a wide range of issues, including the need to develop additional sources that can help to address water shortages.

Given Malaysia's rapid population growth, along with higher standards of living plus inevitable wastage, all of which increase demand, every aspect of water supply needs to be optimised.

However, our current most important source of water is not always understood, let alone appreciated or adequately protected despite the efforts of the federal and state agencies that are responsible for sectors such as irrigation and drainage, forestry, wildlife and rural planning throughout the country.

Malaysia's aptly named rainforests, especially on sloping and higher ground, act like giant sponges that absorb rainfall by soaking it up into their foliage and soils. Some of it supplies the plants and animals in the forest with life-giving water, some of it is recycled into the atmosphere, and some of it is released into streams and rivers not only in a remarkably clean state but also much slower than would happen if it ran off barren land.

Thus, the forests clean our water and help us to manage it by reducing the need for storage and filtration, as well as mitigating flooding. Without forest cover on water catchments, more water would run off during rainy periods, carrying huge loads of sand and silt scraped



off the unprotected land. Then, of course, without the "sponge" to hold any of it back, much less would be available to be released naturally during dry periods.

We would then need an overall greater capacity for water storage. This would coincide with reservoirs filling up with sand and silt, etc., giving rise to the need to clean them out or to build more without much net gain in capacity. At the same time, we would also need a lot more investment in filtration and other water treatment systems. In short, we would have to manage an unending challenge of floods, droughts and sediment that

would impact severely on lives and property. The overall costs of addressing all of these would be a huge burden on federal and state budgets. As it is, we have a natural system that was inherited free of charge with built-in capacities for self-maintenance.

Of course, the forest also provides a home to a unique array of animal life. As we all know, South-East Asia's rainforests are globally renowned for their unique, rich biodiversity which is of massive value for its own sake. Wherever we manage our water catchments properly, we also conserve some of Malaysia's rich natural heritage.

Of course, nature conservation is a national priority but the point is that it is not just about nature for its own sake; it's also about our needs, even for something that may seem unrelated. That glass of water that you lift so easily to your lips would not be in your hands if the forest had not looked after it when it fell from the sky.

As Prof Ahmad writes, we should make water everyone's business. Yes, indeed, that is how it should be. And let's not forget that forests give water and water gives life.

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