



KERATAN AKHBAR

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Get tougher on wildlife criminals

AS we mourn the death of Iman, the country's last Sumatran rhino, we must bear in mind that more Malaysian animals are going to be extinct if no drastic steps are taken to address issues affecting our wildlife, including killing and poaching, which are at a very critical level.

Iman, the female rhino estimated to be around 25 years old, died on Saturday at the Borneo Rhino Sanctuary in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Sabah. In May, Malaysia's last male Sumatran rhino died after suffering organ failure.

It was reported that the Sumatran rhino is listed as critically endangered by the World Wildlife Fund, and the International Rhino Foundation estimates that there are fewer than 80 alive in the world now.

All parties should learn a lesson from the extinction of the Sumatran rhinoceros in our country and we must take up the responsibility to protect animals, especially endangered species.

The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) has said that this is important to ensure that this is not recur in future for other endangered animals.

Among the main factors contributing to the extinction of our wildlife are poaching and loss of habitat due to deforestation. Other factors include weak monitoring and enforcement of our laws on wild-

life protection, lack of public awareness and scientific studies, and inadequate financial allocation and expertise for management of wildlife.

Existing laws should be tightened while the enforcement aspect must be strengthened to protect endangered animal species such as the tiger, elephant, seladang, tapir, sun bear and orang utan. All the enforcement agencies must also strengthen their cooperation to tackle poaching and smuggling of wildlife. Wildlife trafficking is happening in all regions of the world and countries with high biodiversity like Malaysia are the sources, transit areas and hubs for the smuggled species.

The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime has estimated that the global wildlife trafficking industry is worth between US\$7 billion (RM28bil) and US\$23 billion (RM92bil) annually.

It is rather unfortunate that a 2016 report by the Wildlife Justice Commission revealed that Kuala Lumpur is the easiest port to move illegal wildlife. The report also revealed that it costs traffickers 50% less to move contraband through Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) and KLIA2 compared to Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport.

On Sept 25, *The Star* carried an exclusive report by R.AGE revealing that as many as a dozen syndicate officers were connected to syndi-

cates smuggling pangolins across the Malaysia-Thailand border. The report triggered an investigation by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC).

We must remember that such illegal activities are significant contributors to biodiversity loss and species extinction. There is thus an urgent need to review and tighten all existing laws, especially legislation pertaining to animal poaching, to help curb the criminal activities that could reduce the number of our wildlife, particularly the endangered species.

The government should expedite its plan to amend the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 to imprison poachers for more than 10 years and fine them up to RM5 million upon conviction. This is timely in view of the rampant poaching of our protected species.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) has also stressed that without serious action, the already critically small population of wildlife such as the Bornean pygmy elephant will suffer the same fate as the Sumatran rhino.

The killing of Bornean pygmy elephants for their tusks shows how serious the poaching problem is, as well as the continuing irresponsible land exploitation in Sabah.

Despite harsher punishments and improved wildlife enforcement capabilities under the new Act, poaching numbers continue to increase and SAM believed that

this was because of the absence of arrests of high-level individuals in connection with these seizures.

The government should therefore consider mandatory imprisonment not only for poachers but also those charged and proven to be guilty of abetting the culprits.

We must also take into account the police's recommendation for mandatory whipping of criminals involved in wildlife smuggling and tighten conditions for the issuance of firearms licence and hunting permits.

As for the enforcement of the law, the government should strengthen collaboration among the enforcement agencies and increase the number of military or police personnel to check and prevent poaching activities in our forest reserves.

Wildlife species have been declining even within protected areas due to poaching and illegal deforestation.

Greater public awareness, better law enforcement and political will are needed to not only prevent poaching activities and illegal wildlife trade but also to avoid over-exploitation of natural resources.

Protecting wildlife and our nature's treasure trove requires collaboration across NGOs, government, corporate stakeholders and the local communities.

We must take immediate action to help conserve our biodiversity, which includes more than 15,000

species of flowering plants, 1,500 species of terrestrial vertebrates and about 150,000 species of invertebrates.

Despite our hectic schedules, it is necessary for us to pause and ask what we need to do to deal with the multiple environmental threats that could wipe out our precious biodiversity.

Development projects are also impacting on the well-being of wildlife. Take, for example, the construction of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) which will cut through and dissect hundreds of hectares of protected forests in the Central Forest Spine. Adequate and effective measures must be taken to protect wildlife in the affected areas.

We must stress on human behavioural change to stop wildlife trade and road kill. For the relevant laws to succeed, there must be public education and awareness efforts to encourage the public to fight against wildlife exploitation and appreciate their existence as part of our planet.

Efforts to protect our wildlife are also in line with the theme for this year's Earth Day celebration, which is "Protect Our Species". It is intended to educate and raise awareness about the accelerating rate of extinction of various species of fauna and flora.

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