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Graft and environmental unsustainability

Corrupt acts not only damage the environment, but also distort national development priorities and undermine our social and political stability.

By AZRINA SOBIAH

IT DOES not take a rocket scientist to understand the relationship between corruption and environmental degradation. The fact is, the act of corruption ruins everything, and our environment is no exception.

Both corruption and environmentally damaging behaviour are religiously wrong and have a major destructive impact on both humans and non-humans.

The World Bank defines corruption as the "abuse of public power for private gain." In terms of environmental degradation, the overall result of corruption is the diversion of resources from the public good to private consumption.

The end result of such immoral activities is that the impacts that were intended to be for wider benefit, such as society as a whole, are now confined to a limited number of greedy people.

Not only is corruption damaging to the environment, but it also distorts national development priorities, leading to massive human and financial capital flight, and clearly undermines our social and political stability.

The worst consequences of such a corrupt act are the impact on the most vulnerable segments of society, for example, the indigenous people.

Sadly, these problems impair not only the well-being of the present generation but also our next generation. Thus, environmental corruption disrupts environmental sustainability and living. The problem persistently exists, without any trace of it being reduced or eliminated.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in its "Act Against Corruption" campaign stated that "a number of sectors are particularly vulnerable to corruption, including forestry, the protection of endangered species, water supply, oil exploitation, fisheries and hazardous waste management."

Such problems occur at various levels of administration, "from embezzlement during the implementation of environmental programmes, to grand corruption when permits and licences for natural resource exploitation are issued, to the bribery of officials."

Additionally, weaknesses in enforcement also have contributed to an increase of the problem.

In Malaysia, environmental corruption has existed for many years. This symbolises the existence of weaknesses in governmental institutions, poor governance, bad management, monitoring and enforcement.

The results of such limitations are the degradation of environmental quality and resources.

The link between environmental corruption and environmental degradation in Malaysia can be seen in illegal logging and poaching. One example is tiger poaching.

The tiger is the traditional symbol of strength for our nation. It can be found only in Peninsular Malaysia and Southern Thailand.

Currently, the Malaysian Tiger is in danger of extinction from a variety of activities, particularly from poaching. Tiger poaching has resulted in their decreasing numbers.

Recent estimates suggest that only 250 to 340 tigers are left, rendering the Malaysian Tiger a "critically endangered" species.

Various efforts have been made to overcome this problem. For example, poachers have been caught and detained. But the problem still persists. For every hunter arrested, there are

definitely dozens more outside continuing their activities.

Other than poaching, the loss of habitat also poses an intense threat to tigers. Habitat loss occurs in several ways, such as illegal logging, clearing of forests for agricultural activities and the construction of dams.

According to WWF Malaysia, "the development of linear infrastructure - which includes roads, gas pipelines, railways, power and transmission lines and canals - is on the rise in Asia and often fragments wildlife habitats, which could be the biggest threat to low-density species such as tigers. As a result, tigers are unable to breed, hunt, find cover, and establish their own territories."

For some people, it is not easy to link corruption to poaching and illegal logging. However, this does not deny the fact that environmental corruption occurs.

Corruption can involve kickbacks, embezzlement, fraud, conflict of interest, abuse of discretion, extortion, favouritism or nepotism.

To resolve the problem, not only should environmental corruption be addressed through legal action, but all Malaysians need to play their

role in combating the problem, through education and close cooperation between all levels of society and anti-corruption agencies.

Such cooperation can be seen through the setting up of the Environmental Protection and Anti-Corruption Caucus (EPACC) by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) to fight against environmental degradation caused by corruption and abuse of power.

EPACC is made up of representatives of the MACC, Pertubuhan Alam Pelindung Khazanah Alam Malaysia, Rumba Research, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, Persatuan Aktivis and Energy Engineering from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's Chemical Engineering Department, and Ikin's Centre for Science and Environment.

These initiatives should be strongly supported and we hope more people will come forward to assist EPACC and provide relevant information to eliminate environmental corruption.

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