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ON THE FRONTLINE



HIDIR REDUAN



Signs of logging can be seen along the way from Jerantut to Taman Negara. PIC BY ROSELAN AB MALEK

ECOTOURISM

# PROTECTING TAMAN NEGARA

It is vital for the state government to ensure that environmentally polluting activities are not causing harm to the ecosystem

**It is vital for the state government and the various government agencies to always be alert to the slightest claim of environmental degradation so that they could quickly initiate investigation and rectify any shortcomings.**

**E**COTOURISM. The word evokes the lush imagery of riding a slow moving boat, wafting down a clear river as sparkling green canopies of forest frame the riverbanks.

It is the noble endeavour of combining the money-generating activity of catching tourists' eyes to come and trundle through ancient tropical jungles to witness state-sponsored efforts to safeguard ecology through sustainable practices.

What happens though if a well-informed tourist were to catch sight of balding formerly forested landscapes as he is ushered towards an ecotourist attraction?

This notion was brought to the forefront by environmental activists in relation to Taman Negara, the sprawling 2,477km

park that straddles three states: Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan.

A president of a local environmental group did not mince words in claiming that signs of logging left and right on the route to and near the entrance to the nature park in Jerantut could turn off future tourists from coming.

The former chief news editor of a television network expressed worry that well-informed tourists, especially those from advanced countries, would not only no longer return to Taman Negara, but also tell other potential visitors about the purported environmental degradation near the protected park.

A cursory look at the International Union for the Conservation of Nature sees the definition of ecotourism as "environmentally responsible travel to natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and accompanying cultural features, both past and present) that promote conservation, have a low visitor impact and provide for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local peoples".

The online portal www.nature.org further defines ecotourism as "distinguished by its emphasis on conservation, education, traveller responsibility and active community participation".

When the tourism appeal of a

natural park is synonymous with such grand ideals, it is imperative for the state government to make efforts to ensure that potentially environmentally polluting activities like logging are carried out in a location where any potential negative fallout would not harm the ecology of protected areas.

Interestingly, a member of a village security and economic development committee of a village near Taman Negara confirmed that it was possible for tourists to see signs of logging on their way to the protected park.

The mother-of-one, noted that one cannot avoid running into several lorries driving back and fourth while driving to Taman Negara.

She pointed out that drivers could see logged areas while driving along the road.

To be fair, statistics issued by Tourism Pahang showed there was a dip in tourist numbers from 81,874 in 2014 to 68,873 in 2015. However, the same figures showed that the number picked up to 85,288 last year.

When contacted, a representative from Tourism Pahang confirmed that there was a slight uptake of tourists to Taman Negara to 13,193 for the period between January and February this year, compared with 11,234 for the same period last year.

Before one can use the statis-

tics to brush aside concerns from environmentalists, one needs to remember that Pahang is not alien to controversy on environmental issues linked to potential ecotourism sites.

It was only early this year that claims surfaced on rampant logging and agricultural activities, among others, were threatening Tasik Chini's ecosystem, leading to a visit by the Natural Resources and Environment minister to the second largest freshwater lake in Malaysia.

The lake, recognised by the United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture in May 2009 as the first biosphere reserve in Malaysia, is supposed to be undergoing real-time monitoring by eight telemetry stations to ensure that its waters are safe from siltation, mining, logging and agricultural activities.

Where there is smoke, there is fire. It is vital for the state government and government agencies to always be alert to the slightest claim of environmental degradation so that they could quickly investigate and rectify any shortcomings.

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