

KERATAN AKHBAR



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Importance of protecting peat swamp forests

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AS we celebrated World Wildlife Day last week (March 3), the Rainforest Trust and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) commended Sarawak for continuing to protect wildlife and wildlife habitats. Doing so is crucial for the long-term sustainability of humans both globally and in Sarawak as well.

World Wildlife Day this year was celebrated amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been wreaking havoc on economies and livelihoods worldwide for over 12 months now. (Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation on March 11, 2020.)

The triple global crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, and the increasing risks of emerging pandemic diseases are interrelated, all reflecting the destructive toll that human activity has taken on our planet over the past two centuries.

Within that context, Sarawak's vision in establishing and maintaining a vibrant system of totally protected areas is laudable. Large, intact protected areas are key to restoring the balance between humans and nature, and ensuring future environmental sustainability.

Especially critical in the South-East Asian context is Sarawak's protection of its peat swamp forests, with Maludam National Park being the jewel in the crown.

South-East Asia contains the largest areas of tropical peatlands and peat carbon store globally, with Maludam being the biggest and



deepest single peat dome in Borneo. Protecting this area has multiple and varied benefits for both the local and global communities and economies.

Peatlands are notorious for destructive fires and the resulting haze. Protecting the peatland forests, and hence maintaining the waterlogged conditions and high water table, means that fires in these areas are almost unknown.

Peat domes are higher than the surrounding lands and the soils are highly permeable, so they function as enormous sponges, holding between 500 and 1,000 times their own weight in water. This means they provide a continuous source of

water for the surrounding villages and longhouse communities, which would otherwise suffer water shortages in times of drought. They are also effective buffers against storms.

In addition, these areas are vital for conserving some of the world's most endangered species, such as the red-banded langur that is found only in Maludam. This beautiful monkey is the most endangered primate in Malaysia, so if it isn't protected here, it would be extinct globally. Maludam is also home to the endangered proboscis monkey.

But peatlands are extremely sensitive and fragile systems. If the trees are lost, the drying peat would oxidise into the air and gradually

disappear, in extreme cases leaving barren land. This can be highly detrimental to the local communities who would suffer from increased floods and droughts.

Drying peatlands also release large quantities of carbon dioxide, thereby contributing enormously to climate change. Sarawak's protection of Maludam, together with other peat swamp forests such as Sedilu and Sebuyau, is preventing such damage from happening.

The critical regional importance of Maludam and other peat swamps in Malaysia have been of long-term interest to international agencies including the Asian Development Bank and United Nations Development Programme, and their natural carbon sinks give them potential to attract significant climate finance.

As countries around the world grapple with how to "build back greener" after Covid-19, Sarawak's efforts to conserve and expand its protected natural areas is a wonderful contribution towards achieving this goal.

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