



KERATAN AKHBAR

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Without protection of ecosystem, loss of mangroves inevitable, warns lecturer



Remnants of mangrove forest land that had been cleared for development in Batu Kawan.

GEORGE TOWN: The loss of mangrove forests is inevitable as long as the ecosystem is not properly protected, says Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Biological Sciences senior lecturer Dr Foong Swee Yeok.

Foong said despite awareness on the importance of mangroves having greatly improved since the 1980s, demand for mangrove land to be converted for aquaculture activities (especially prawn and fish farms) was still intense, especially to cultivate prawns for export. She said many aquaculture

farm operators used "food security" as an excuse to push for the conversion of mangrove land in Penang.

"In fact, mangroves as natural breeding and nursery grounds for many commercially important fisheries, such as fish, prawns and crabs, should have higher priority over aquaculture in terms of food security.

"Not only that, many of the aquaculture practices carry a huge carbon footprint. Conversion from the mangrove ecosystem to aquaculture ponds will transform the site from being a

carbon sink into a carbon source.

"Furthermore, the sediments in mangrove areas are problematic due to their acid-potential nature. The formation of very acidic soil when mangrove lands are drained and oxidised will make the sites unsuitable for development (disease, pollution, low soil pH, subsidence problem coupled with rising sea level issues).

"In short, decision-makers shouldn't make mangroves compete with aquaculture for survival," she said.

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'Penang has lost 58pc of mangroves in last 40 years'

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Foong said in the earlier stages between 1950 and 1990, the reasons for mangrove destruction in Penang were urbanisation (George Town to Jelutong), airport construction (Batu Maung), land reclamation (Bayan Lepas coast), residential developments (Sungai Prai) and aquaculture (Baik Pulau and Seberang Prai Selatan).

She added that within 40 years, about 58 per cent of the state's mangrove area had been lost.

This, she noted, was due to land conversion to township developments, especially along the east coast of Penang Island, and also the loss of riverine mangroves in Sungai Prai.

"To reduce the impact of mangrove destruction, all remaining mangroves have to be protected as permanent forest reserves.

"Certain important mangroves that provide ecosystem services (coastal protection and migratory bird stops), fishery grounds (feeding grounds for fish, prawns and crabs) and carbon sequestration (climate change mitigation) such as the Teluk Ayer Tawar-Kuala Muda area, should be protected with overlapping conservation statuses, like gazetement as a permanent forest reserve and Ramsar site.

A Ramsar site is a wetland designated to be of international importance under the Ramsar Convention, an intergovernmental treaty established in 1971 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

"All this can only be done through the promotion of public awareness," she said, adding that currently, mangroves were widely perceived only as "wasteland" to be converted to other uses.