

Let public enjoy forest

I WISH to refer to the article on the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve (*The Star*, June 9).

It was stated that this forest reserve is rich in biodiversity and serves as an outdoor research lab for undergraduates specialising in forest research, and therefore it is off limits to the public. The 1,176ha forest was gazetted as an education and research forest.

While it is highly commendable and wonderful that facilities have been built for research in the forest with visits by international researchers, I would like to suggest that UPM open part of the space for the public to enjoy the forest.

Apart from allocating tracks for the public which run only around the perimeter, UPM should take the opportunity to set up public outreach programmes to educate children, senior citizens and the general public on our wonderful biodiversity and - more importantly - on the conservation of this important resource through the establishment of an Education and Information Centre

The outreach arm of the university can "take the university to the people," as part of a life-long process of learning and the public understanding of science. Extension programmes around the world serve as a network of knowledgeable academics and staff that provide life-long educational programmes, including those related to climate, climate change, agriculture,

natural resources and everything related to the forest.

Extension programmes should be part of a nationwide educational network of scientists and educators who help people solve problems and put knowledge to use, while educating and creating awareness on biodiversity and all issues relating to preserving and conserving biodiversity.

These programmes will also provide a link between the university and the citizens of not only Selangor but all of Malaysia. The environmental themes could include the climate, flora and fauna of the forest, ecosystems, food, agriculture, health and water.

Many issues in conservation are ideal for educating the public about the environment and the role that science can play in preserving nature. Examples of "real-life stories" increase public awareness of environmental issues in general, as well as interest in the sciences among our young people.

In essence, conservation of the forest can serve as a vehicle to make science and mathematics more exciting for young students.

More importantly, the establishment of such a centre can draw upon public appeal for its projects to educate the community at large in conservation, biology and the sciences. Students will become intrigued by these conservation issues and the techniques that can be employed

to address them.

This effort has value in promoting student interest in the fields of conservation, ecology and molecular biology, even among students who previously cared little about science. It will encourage students and volunteers of all ages to come and work in the lab as well as in the Information and Education Centre. This encourages a broader appreciation of conservation issues and their scientific solutions.

The Centre can operate with corporate partnerships through broadcasting, print and other media. It can create opportunities for science teachers and students to participate in field and laboratory programmes.

This approach has been especially successful in developed countries like New Zealand, the US and Australia, inculcating the importance of wildlife in their culture with an appreciation of nature without disturbing fauna and flora in any way. Many of these information centres have interns and newly graduated students volunteering their services in these centres, ensuring that visitors' questions are adequately answered.

This will indeed contribute to our nation's vision of developing the culture of science, while respecting and caring for the environment.

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