

Sanctuary for research

Students depend on forest reserve to carry out field work



Community activity: A UPM forestry staff member explaining about herbal plants to students during an educational visit to the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve.

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Photos courtesy of UPM

THE Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve in Puchong is rich in biodiversity and serves as an outdoor research lab for undergraduates specialising in forest research.

StarMetro recently met Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) Forestry Faculty dean Datin Dr Faridah Hanum Ibrahim and several faculty members to find out more about the research facilities housed in the Sultan Idris Shah Forestry Education Centre (Sisfec) located within the forest.

The forest became a topic of debate recently when some hikers were denied entry by security guards stationed at the entrance at Taman Wawasan 5/1.

They have now asked for permission to continue hiking in the forest.

The 1,176ha forest is under the jurisdiction of the Selangor Forestry Department and the Selangor government granted a 80-year lease to UPM in 1996 for education, research and extension in forestry.

Having been gazetted as an education and research forest, the forest is actually off-limits to the public and access is granted upon permission by the UPM Forestry Faculty.

The faculty offers three undergraduate programmes (Bachelor of Wood Science and Technology; Bachelor of Forestry Science; and Bachelor of Parks and Recreation



Spoiling nature: Officers have found rubbish left by hikers and hashers and traces of burning in the forest.

Sciences) and graduate courses like Master of Tropical Forest Resource Management and Master of Wood Industries Technology.

UPM deputy dean Dr Mohd Zaki Hamzah said they had more than 600 students, including 239 post-graduate students.

"We have more than 50 courses running each semester and the forest serves as an outdoor research laboratory for our students," said Dr Mohd Zaki.

The research centre is accessible through the eastern border in Taman

Saujana Puchong and includes a main administration centre, a lecture hall, laboratories, dormitories, camp site, nursery, obstacle course circuit and a paintball field.

Dr Faridah said the dormitories were completed in 2009 while the academic buildings were completed last year.

"We have been conducting research in the forest, sometimes with international researchers, long before these facilities were built," she said.

The chalets can accommodate up

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to 60 students doing field work in the forest.

"The obstacle course and paintball field are meant for our recreational and leadership training.

"The paintball field is built on an open area is not meant for public use," she said.

Wildlife ecology lecturer Dr Puan Chong Leong said some of his undergraduate students who were studying the birds and wildlife would set up camp in the forest, staying between one and two months while the post-graduates could be staying there for up to a year.

"There are more than 200 species of birds recorded in the forest and most are protected species.

"About 35 of them are threatened species. There are also more than 30 species of migratory birds every year," said Dr Puan.

Dr Faridah said the university followed a Forest Management Plan

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Spotted: This bright-coloured Oriental Dwarf Kingfisher is one of the 200 species recorded in the forest reserve.



Keeping an eye out: UPM Forestry Faculty students in a bird-watching excursion.



Living outdoors: Students can sometimes spend up to a year in the forest to do research on wildlife and would set up tents in the area.

Uncontrolled number of hikers can be detrimental to the forest

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that was approved by the state government and Forestry Department, "We have had two plans so far. The first one was from 1996 to 2006 while the second will bring us through 2015.

"There are 8.1ha zoned for development and we have so far used about 2ha," she said.

Forest and plantation section head Dr Paiman Bawon stressed that the plan was put in place to ensure that the management of the forest was carried out systematically.

Besides the development zone, the other three zones were controlled disturbance, no-disturbance, and a demonstration forest and outdoor recreation zone.

Part of the trail used by hikers goes through the no-disturbance zone.

Senior lecturer and researcher Dr Manohar Mariapan said the effects of having too many people in the forest was cumulative and could only be seen over time.

"The research that we are doing here is for the longevity of the forest. Having external disturbances would affect our study," he said.

Associate Professor Dr Lai Food See said people sometimes had the misconception that if they went in for just a few hours, it would not affect the health of the forest.

"Over years, it can have a degenerative effect on the forest.

"Only certain areas are designated for our activities," said Dr Lai.

Dr Manohar said garbage and food



New facility: The lecture hall in the UPM Sultan Idris Shah Forestry Education Centre is used by students.

bits left behind attracted rodents and increased the risk of the diseases like leptospirosis because there was a river running through the forest.

"Leptospirosis is caused by rat urine and because the river flows past the housing area, it could affect residents," he said.

Selangor Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) chairman Henry Goh said the public's request to use the forest was a fair one but they must also ensure that their activities would not affect the research reserve.

"The Selangor Forestry Department and UPM have plans to develop part of the main forest into a community park," he said.

From an environmental standpoint, Goh said some of the effects of having an unrestricted and uncontrolled number of people entering the forest were trail degradation, soil erosion and pollution.

"Although there are genuine nature lovers, there are bound to be a few who will cut trees, poach animals, and pollute sites and streams.

"There must be some mechanism put in place to ensure that this does not happen," he said.

He suggested that the hikers formally register an association and be responsible for the actions of their members.

"The access and activities of the



hikers should be limited to the approved trails. The trail users can also help to repair and improve the trails.

"MNS is ready to provide advice and assistance on the proper approach towards conservation and protection of our environment for stakeholders and the public," said Goh.

UPM professors and lecturers suggested that the trail could go around the forest instead of through it.

State Tourism, Consumer Affairs and Environment Committee chairman Elizabeth Wong said they hoped to settle the issue by the end of this month.

"We want to make it a recreational trail for people to enjoy without disturbing the forest.

"We have gone through the route taken by the hikers through the entrance at Taman Wawasan and we have had discussions with the Forestry Department.

"We want more people to be involved, including the orang asli," she said.

Wong said the Ayer Hitam forest had been gazetted as a permanent reserve for education and research, including the 22ha site that was originally earmarked for a cemetery.

"We are hoping to work out a route around the fringes of the forest to minimise disturbances.

"The forest is a regional centre for research and we advise people to stick to the route once we have determined it," she said.