

SOS from our fragile highlands

I REFER to the report on the rampant deforestation (due to logging and/or agricultural activities) taking place in the Gua Musang area, especially at the pristine Lojing Highlands in Kelantan, "The hills of Lojing stripped bare" (*The Star*, Oct 1). The river water in the area is now polluted with pesticide residue, heavy metals and silt from the eroded highlands, killing fish and other river life.

Furthermore, an area the size of 20 football fields near Lojing Highlands was reported to have been cleared for growing durian, "100ha of forest reserve now a durian orchard" (*The Star*, Oct 1).

From my observation so far, deforestation is the order of the day throughout the country. For all we know, deforestation is not only rampant in Lojing Highlands but also throughout peninsular Malaysia, including Cameron Highlands. If this is allowed to go on unchecked, all of us will suffer in the long run. Disaster is waiting to happen.

I am a geologist and soil scientist by profession and for the last 40 years I have focused on the soils in the peninsula, studying their formation, mineralogy and physico-chemical properties that affect their potential for agriculture.

If what was reported is anything to go by, the lives of the orang asli in Gua Musang have been destroyed by the logging activities. To put it bluntly, their playground (or ancestral land) for hundreds of years have been butchered and/or levelled to the ground. How can we expect them to make a living on land that has been degraded beyond imagination, and all because of greed?

It was said by someone in authority that the land does not belong to



the orang asli but to the state, "Stand down, warring parties told" (*The Star*, Oct 1). For us, it may not mean anything but to the orang asli, that land is their lifeblood and they depend on its forest for their sustenance and income. No wonder some orang asli groups in the deep interior of Gua Musang set up blockades to prevent logging activities in their area after they saw the level of deforestation that was going on, "Battleground in Gua Musang jungle" (*The Star*, Sept 30). I wonder who is going to help them now that their source of sustenance has been partly destroyed by the logging activities. I suggest that the powers that be take appropriate action immediately to help them. Action should also be taken against those who are responsible for their misery and for the destruction they caused to the biodiversity in the area.

It has been explained by the government agency responsible for agriculture that any land in the highlands of the peninsula with more than 35° slope should be left untouched because these are fragile areas. A slight disturbance could cause soil erosion or, worse, landslides especially during the wet season between November and January.

Once the land is degraded, it will take a very long time to return to its natural state. Some would say we can let nature take its course but we must remember that nature has its own way of doing things, sometimes not to our liking. Call it the wrath of nature if you like. A case in point is the destructive flood on December 2014 which caused havoc not only in the upper reaches of the Kelantan River but in almost every district in the state as well. I may be wrong in my

judgment about the immediate cause of the flood but evidence collected so far all points to extensive land clearing and logging as the main culprit.

Cutting the forest would remove trees that protect the soil below. So, for all intents and purposes, forest cover should be maintained by at least 70%.

Responsible citizens of Malaysia cannot just sit down and do nothing about this problem. We have to say it loud and clear to those responsible for land/soil conservation in the country to pull up their socks to conserve our fragile highlands. It is for our own good and the good of mankind.

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