

When it is an offence to enter a forest reserve

RECENTLY, a group of students were detained by rangers from the Selangor Forestry Department for entering the Ayer Hitam forest reserve near Bandar Wawasan, Bukit Puchong. The detention of the students who were in the forest reserve on a weekday raises a few questions.

The Ayer Hitam forest reserve, also known as Bukit Wawasan, in Puchong is one of the few green lungs in the area and is popular among hikers as well as those seeking recreational activities in their free time.

Every day, many people from all walks of life use this forest reserve as a place for exercise and recreation. The crowd increases sharply during weekends with hundreds of hikers and environment lovers joining in.

Unfortunately, most of them are

unaware that Ayer Hitam is not a recreational forest for the public; it is gazetted to Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) for research purposes.

It is an offence to enter this forest reserve without permission, and intruders can be prosecuted and fined!

But there is no distinct signage to warn people that the forest is out of bounds to them. This absence of signage is evident that the relevant authorities have ignored their moral obligation to inform the public of the status of this forest reserve.

Whose responsibility is it to inform the public about this? And without adequate signage to warn the public against trespassing, can enforcement action such as the detention of the students be justified?

Why didn't the authorities conduct their enforcement during weekends when they would have been able to nab more people than the innocent few who got caught on a weekday?

Are the authorities really serious about informing the public about the entry restriction?

There are many initiatives and actions the authorities could and should have done to deal with this matter.

Firstly, clear signage should have been put up at strategic places at the entrance of the forest reserve to warn the public that it is out of bounds to them.

On weekends, students from nearby schools could be roped in as volunteer junior rangers and placed at the entrance of the forest to advise hikers and other visitors to stay out. They could be given

special vests to wear so that the public are aware that they are assisting the rangers.

An information kiosk could also be set up at the entrance of the reserve.

Another option is to organise talks in schools to inform students of the status of the forest reserve and encourage them to share this information with their family and friends.

There are many other initiatives and actions that can be implemented if the authorities are serious about addressing this problem.

Enforcement should be the last option as many of those who are innocently encroaching into this forest reserve are doing it for recreational purposes.

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