

Biodiversity conservation vital for all denizens

● Yesterday is World Environment Day which is observed on June 5 every year. This year's theme is 'Time for Nature', with the focus on biodiversity.

KUALA LUMPUR: At a time when the world is fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and wildlife such as bats and pangolins are suspected to be the original hosts of the deadly coronavirus, humanity is yet again reminded of the importance of conserving biodiversity.

Researchers have said that the destruction of biodiversity, including the consumption of so-called exotic wildlife by humans, can trigger epidemics such as COVID-19 and Ebola.

Natural ecosystems such as soil, water, air, animals, plants and various other biological elements complement one another to provide a conducive environment for all living things to thrive on earth.

However, in the name of development, humans have been destroying forests,

rivers, land and hills which over the long term has had adverse effects on the climate and wildlife populations.

The current pandemic, said Malaysian Nature Society president Prof Dr Ahmad Ismail, has led to the whole world talking about wildlife and the need to protect their habitats.

"The whole world is saying that we shouldn't eat wildlife resources and to just leave them alone in their habitats which should be protected," he said.

He told Bernama nearly one million species in the world are facing extinction and this is the reason why the perpetuation of biological diversity should be given due focus.

In Malaysia, he added, more efforts must be made to conserve wildlife habitats at the various national parks and

forest reserves such as the Ulu Muda forest reserve in Kedah.

INTERLINKED

Ahmad said the continuous ravaging of wildlife habitats and excessive wildlife hunting and foraging of forest resources, as well as the emission of greenhouse gases by industries and vehicles, have caused climate changes.

He said the deterioration in the air and water qualities have shown Malaysians how the environment is closely interlinked with human activities.

"If we want our environment to remain clean, it is necessary for us to conserve it. For this, we need to have a proper system and the right technologies in place to preserve the quality of our environment," he added.

Meanwhile, the challenge for global communities today is to find solutions to simultaneously address the issues of biodiversity loss, climate change and land degradation and to put biodiversity conservation at the forefront of economic development.

According to Universiti Putra Malaysia senior lecturer in environmental studies Dr Mohd Yusoff Ishak, Malaysia is among the 17 "megadiverse" nations in the world.

According to Conservation International – an international environmental non-profit organisation – 70 per cent of the world's flora and fauna exist in only these 17 countries. To be eligible for the megadiversity status, a country must have a high total number of species, including a significant percentage of endemic species.

In terms of the National

Biodiversity Index, Malaysia ranks 12th in the world. This index is based on estimates of a country richness and endemism in four terrestrial vertebrate classes and vascular plants.

Although Malaysia's biological diversity is among the richest in the world, some of its prized wildlife species are either decreasing in population or have become extinct altogether.

Mohd Yusoff said the Sumatran rhinoceros, for instance, became extinct when the last rhino named Iman died of cancer on Nov 23, 2019, at the Borneo Rhino Sanctuary in Lahad Datu, Sabah. The last Javan rhinoceros, meanwhile, died in the peninsula way back in 1932.

"Malaysia's tiger population has also reached a critical state with only 200 of this iconic species remaining in our country now. If no drastic action is taken to conserve our tigers, they will become extinct in five years' time," he warned, adding that the Malayan tiger is in the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list of threatened species.

ANIMAL-RELATED EPIDEMICS

Mohd Yusoff also said that the destruction of biodiversity can endanger human health, as the transmission of zoonotic diseases from wildlife to humans has been attributed to biodiversity loss.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, 75 percent of all emerging infectious diseases in humans are zoonotic and that these diseases are closely interlinked with the health of ecosystems.

"Diseases such as Ebola, bird flu, Middle-East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), Nipah virus and now COVID-19 are all passed from animal to man as a result of human activities," said Mohd Yusoff.

He said to prevent the emergence of a new generation of disease outbreaks, mitigate the harmful effects of climate change and safeguard food and water security, it is imperative to manage biodiversity in a sustainable manner.

"In our pursuit of development in this Industrial Revolution 4.0 era, (we must not forget that) only a healthy and stable ecosystem can guarantee us (of a stable) supply of food, water and medicines," he added. –Bernama