Natural sanctuary for Temuan folk

Orang asli visit regularly to bathe, fish, trek and hold family gatherings

By: JADE CHAN
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KAMPONG Rasau Ulu, looks back on the memories of the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve in Puchong, Selangor.

The 59-year-old recalled many of his explorations in the forest, including a time he discovered a panther's footprints there.

"I first entered the forest when I was six with my father and uncle. I once came across three toyols (baby-like ghouls) in the forest, but they merely laughed and disappeared after I asked them where their parents were," Enak said.

"I also cited for hours while sitting on a tree-top when I got left behind in the forest as a child," he added.

According to Enak, whose knowledge of the forest and guidance is often sought by the Temuan orang asli tribe from his village and nearby Kampung Rasau Hilir visit the forest at least once a month, as the forest is part of their lives.

"We bathe, fish, trek, and hold family gatherings there," Enak said.

The Ayer Hitam Forest Park is believed to have been settled by the Temuan orang asli tribe 400 years ago.

The entrance to the forest is from Bandar Saujana Puchong, just 10 minutes away from the heart of the Puchong township and a short distance from the Puchong Selatan toll plaza off the LDP Highway.

The forest, under the jurisdiction of the Selangor Forestry Department, is known as an education and research forest, "Ejak said.

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Rich heritage: The Ayer Hitam Forest Forest in Puchong is believed to have been settled by the Temuan orang asli tribe 400 years ago.

and fauna, with its flora biodiversity ranging from timber and fruit trees to algae and ferns, to palm and bamboo, and medical herbs.

Creatures that have been discovered in the forest include primates, wild boar, deer, birds, snakes, frogs, fish and insects.

“Our researchers have discovered some plant and insect species that are endemic (found naturally) in that forest,” Awang said.

Awang said based on a study published in 2007, he estimated that the conservation value of the forest was worth RM2.4bil.

“However, if the forest is converted to residential land, the net loss to society would be RM1.3bil,” he said.

“In any economic development, we have to take the value of forest goods and services into account. On the subject of social costs, we have to consider the impact on the present and future generations,” he said.

While acknowledging that development was essential, Awang said equity issues had to be factored in.

“Who gets what? Who benefits? Who will pay for the loss of resources? If we have to pay, who is willing to pay and how much?”

“The payment mechanism can be charged through the market, depending on the type of goods and services. One example is to use taxpayers’ money to maintain and conserve the forest,” he said.

Awang said what was needed to be done for the forest was an environmental impact assessment (EIA) on the physical, social and economic aspects.

“We need to study the impact on the local community in terms of risk aspects like landslides and pollution.

“The extended cost benefit analysis needs to take into account all the direct and indirect impact in the cash flow,” he said.

“The forest environmental cost and benefits should be included, and not just its market value,” Awang said.

He also suggested that the forest be jointly managed by getting the community to support the preservation of the forest and consider it a part of the public property.

For more information on the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve, visit www.forestry.upm.edu.my. Those wishing to organise activities in the forest can contact forest conservator Paimin Bawon at 03-8943 7162/7219 or paimin@putra.upm.edu.my.