

03/03/1997

Balancing development and wetland conservation

Datuk A. Kadir Jasin

DURING the recent fasting month, while accompanying the Economic Adviser to the Government, Tun Daim Zainuddin, and Coordinator of the Wetland Project, Dr Muralee Menon, on an aerial inspection of the project site at Sepang, I had the opportunity of flying over the the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA).

With its almost completed cylindrical control tower rising high above the green surroundings and one of its two runways paved, the KLIA looks set to become another technology bridge linking the country to the new millennium.

Baring unforeseen circumstances, the KLIA will have as its neighbour the 2,000ha wetland sanctuary which will showcase conservation as well as environmentally-sound development.

With permission from the ATC (Air Traffic Control) "to operate" (in layman's language to fly) at 1,000 ft and below, we were at liberty to inspect the airport and its surroundings as we made several low passes over the project area.

Thanks to the brainwave of Malaysia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations (now President of the UN General Assembly), Tan Sri Razali Ismail and the handiwork of Menon, a medical doctor turned conservationist, the Wetland Project is coming up nicely and will become a contrasting but useful neighbour to the new airport.

With the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, giving his personal attention (in his capacity as patron), including assigning Tun Daim with the task of heading the Wetland Foundation - which will be responsible for funding and overseeing the management of the project - the Sepang conservation project is assured of a quick and smooth take-off.

What is now left is for the Selangor Government to speed up the assignment of the land to the foundation. The project is located in one of the richest and fairly well preserved wetlands in the country. It comprises lowland forests, ex-tin mining pools and marshes.

Tun Daim said he did not expect to face major problems in securing the land and financing the project. He said the Selangor Menteri Besar, Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, had been forthcoming and he felt that the private sector was more than willing to help finance the project.

The benefits of the project to Selangor are obvious. It will enhance further the state's tourism potential, improve the balance between development and conservation and preserve the the lowland's water retention capacity.

Wetlands are vital not only to flora and fauna but also for the regulation of rain water.

The Sepang conservation project will protect and promote diversity of plant and animal life which includes a rich variety of migratory birds which have been using the disused mining pools as a stopover.

Having a sizeable conservation project close to the airport and in the vicinity of Putrajaya will also add to giving the Multi-Media Super Corridor (MSC) a kinder and more humane face.

To be called the Malaysian Wetland Sanctuary, the project will act as the research site for sustainable development in addition to opening its doors to the ordinary visitors for sightseeing and recreation.

As Razali put it, the project is a good example of a joint undertaking by the Federal and Selangor Governments towards giving credibility to the

country's environmental policy.

It is an opportunity for the private sector to show that they care for the environment by funding the project.

(END)