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Balancing growth and wildlife (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today State Governments should consider setting up their own wildlife parks, adding that there should be a balance between development and the protection of wildlife.

While noting the importance of wildlife protection, the Prime Minister gave a stern reminder to interest groups that they should not adopt a fanatical approach to wildlife conservation.

He said although wildlife conservation was necessary, it should not be at the expense of development nor to the extent that it affected people's livelihood.

"We have to balance development and the need to conserve wildlife. If we want to preserve wildlife until it affects our livelihood, then we will be in a difficult situation.

"It is very nice to preserve wildlife but when you are eaten by a tiger, you won't say 'I am preserving wildlife'," Dr Mahathir said at Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman's Hari Raya open house in Puchong.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a New Straits Times report today which quoted wildlife experts as saying that State Governments should preserve their wildlife reserves or forests where wildlife was concentrated to ensure that animals would not become extinct or embark on mass migrations.

They said the common excuse given by State Governments that forest reserves cleared for development would be substituted with other State land, was of little help because certain species which had become established in certain areas would be unable to survive elsewhere.

They said the extinction and mass migration of animals into neighbouring countries where forests were less threatened by development was evident.

They said maintaining tracts of natural forest as corridors would allow animals the freedom to migrate from one place to another.

Asked why most States did not have their own wildlife parks, Dr Mahathir said:

"To have a State park requires a lot of money. The people must be prepared to spend money (for such parks) or allow the Government to spend money on them (wildlife parks) and not on other things.

"But we want everything... roads, kampung roads, buildings and all and at the same time we want to preserve wildlife and want parks. Parks cost money but we can still build them. However, the people should not complain if they do not have other facilities that requires government spending."

Dr Mahathir said wild animals in Malaysia had not become extinct unlike those in certain European countries.

"In other countries there are a lot of cases of extinction. There are no more wolves in England and a lot of animals have disappeared in Europe. Those are extinct but in Malaysia, at least we can keep and rear them. They are not extinct."

Asked whether States should have their own parks, the Prime Minister said:

"Yes, I think they should. We should have a balance. Don't just say that we want to preserve wildlife and not preserve human beings. Human beings also need to be preserved. There must be a balance between the two and we mustn't be extreme."

The NST frontpaged a report on Tuesday which said rapid development was taking a toll on wildlife and their habitats and unless efforts were made to preserve them, they might soon disappear.

The report said that development was depleting wildlife forest reserves in three populous States - Selangor, Perak and Penang.

In Selangor, more than 60 per cent of the 16 wildlife forest reserves have been degazetted, leaving only a handful such as Bukit Kutu, Templer Park, Sungai Dusun, Kuala Selangor, Klang Gate and Fraser's Hill.

Dr Mahathir was also asked to comment on a column in the NST yesterday which said that communist and Muslim militants were persecuting Christians in certain countries.

He said others the world over suffered similar fates.

"Muslims in Bosnia, were also subjected to persecution."

The the column's author, A.M. Rosenthal, contended that Protestants and Catholics faced persecution in many countries and did not even enjoy freedom of worship.

Also present at the Hari Raya open house were Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, Ministers, Deputy Minister and foreign dignitaries.

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