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Errant developers be warned

IDEALLY, man should leave nature be. But this is an impossibility given the need for mankind to undertake development and progress. The global scenario is not a happy one with scientists predicting that there could be more climatic chaos with global warming caused by increasing degradation of the environment. Sadly, mankind while acutely aware of the burgeoning threat to the environment is all talk and little action as manifestly clear after the historic 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

At home, there is no doubt that the media is greatly conscious of its important role in creating environmental consciousness. Write-ups and exposes could fill volumes. But environmental awareness among the people has yet to reach a level that we can be proud of.

Education and enforcement are perhaps the only answers. Naturally, among the authorities' important target groups, developers top the list. Like other businessmen, developers will want to maximise profits. Hence, they will try to have as many buildings as possible in any given development area. It goes without saying that it is easier and more profitable to build on flat land than undulating terrain. That is why unscrupulous developers will not hesitate to cut hills and fill the valleys to give them a perfect flat piece of land for their project, without due investigation into its effect on the surroundings. The cumulative consequences of such actions, if not nipped in the bud, could be disastrous to the Malaysian environment.

It was not long ago that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told developers that while many of them are showing greater concern for the environment by maintaining trees and hills in their projects, the situation is still far from satisfactory. As far as possible, developers should retain existing trees and hills and blend buildings into the natural surroundings.

Obviously, the frequent exhortations by the authorities have not been fully heeded. The Cabinet, at its meeting on Wednesday, expressed concern that there are still reports of developers flouting guidelines and regulations. Dr Mahathir himself saw massive land clearing works in Selangor on his way back from a visit to Taman Negara last week. Investigation shows that the developer concerned has indeed violated the laws despite an earlier reminder on the need for strict adherence. The Selangor Government has ordered a work stoppage.

The Federal Government's firm stand over indiscriminate felling of trees and levelling of hills is vital for maintaining our rich flora and fauna. Although rapid development in the last 10 years has taken its toll somewhat, it is still not late to save the situation. More than 70 per cent of the country is still covered with forests. We must jealously guard this heritage. State Governments and local authorities have been directed to step up checks on development projects and the citizenry urged to be the ears and eyes against any irresponsible degradation of the land. Developers are warned in no uncertain terms that they will be taken to court if moral suasion does not work.

While strict laws and stiff fines are deterrents, revoking the licences of errant developers and blacklisting them will show that the Government means business. But, of course, the authorities have to take into consideration the interests of the buyers before taking such drastic measures.

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