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Let's do more to ensure sustainable development

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IT is heartening to note that national wildlife issues have been accorded much coverage recently.

While this coverage is commendable, I am saddened by the fact that 60 per cent of the 16 wildlife reserves in Selangor have been degazetted for other use. How is this possible?

From what little I know of managing natural resources, an inventory of the total forest cover in the country is in order before we can find out whether we have indeed struck a balance between conservation and development.

It is also appalling that many of these "wildlife reserves" do not have either buffer zones or corridors. If these areas are useful for the sound management of natural resources, such provisions are absolutely necessary, bearing in mind that at the present rate of development, our country can no longer be proud of its rich flora and fauna.

One must agree with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that we should not be extreme in managing the natural resources. Therefore, measures such as culling species that have overpopulated certain areas as in the case of monkeys should be supported while species that are depleted such as the Sumatran rhinoceros should be protected.

Perhaps, this is what conservation is about - utilising species which are in abundance and at the same time preserving those few in number.

Therefore, I would agree that nature conservation and development should go hand-in-hand as demanded by the principle of sustainable development.

All one could ask for is to give nature its due. If an area is gazetted as a reserve, it should be set aside as such or another forest area be used, as was done by Selangor. But as pointed out by the experts, such compensation is not good enough.

The Government should put a stop to this unhealthy habit of changing land status. As pointed out in the reports, there has been an undesirable shift of balance in favour of development. This calls for serious consideration by the authorities concerned before more forest areas are "converted".

If one is unsure about striking a balance between conservation and development, one can always refer to the Seventh Malaysia Plan and the annual Budget to determine the percentage allocated for conservation.

At the same time, one should take into account the benefits of setting aside areas for conservation. Many of these areas are now excellent eco-tourism spots which emphasise local community development and involve the hardcore poor.

Then, there is also the downside of development such as pollution, hazardous waste and climate change.

The Government should give due recognition to those agencies and individuals who have shed both sweat and tears and who are committed to preserving the environment through recycling of paper, aluminium cans and bottles, reusing envelopes and paper, and reducing consumption in general.

These seemingly "small" efforts to save a few trees will eventually ensure high living standards for the people. This is only possible if pollution and deforestation are controlled within limits spelt out by the relevant agencies.

Conservation, therefore, is not just the Government meeting the requirements of international conventions such as the Convention of

Biodiversity, but an effort by the whole population. To date, we have yet to tap the resources of community participation in safeguarding the environment.

I support the notion that the corporate sector should provide a helping hand in safeguarding the environment.

It should not restrict itself to just providing funds for the zoo adoption scheme but be more innovative such as sponsoring expeditions to nature areas, biological research, and assist in the enforcement of the Environmental Quality Act by simply adhering to the guidelines.

It would be viewed as extremely bad publicity if a big corporate body resorts to disposing of rubbish, oil and toxic waste in its own backyard.

As a Malaysian, I think we are very conscious of cleanliness at home. This exemplary behaviour should be extended to our environment such as picnic spots, waterfalls and parks.

States like Perlis, Perak and Penang are to be commended for their positive action in recognising nature as not just a refuge for wildlife but also as an important source of clean water and air, and for the maintenance of the life-cycle that we tend to take for granted.

If the challenges of Vision 2020 is to create a more loving and caring society, then conservation of nature should be included to ensure that we will enjoy high living standards in future.

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