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Lojing continues to lose its forests (HL)

M. Jeffri Razali

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Three years after the Federal Government raised concern over the severe environmental degradation in the Lojing Highlands in Kelantan, logging and land clearing activities appear to have continued unabated.

Balding hills, eroded hillsides, and silted rivers, are a common sight in the once pristine highland forest.

It was evident that scant attention was given to minimise environmental destruction despite the Cabinet twice calling on the State Government to act decisively to overcome the problem.

The latest concern was expressed by Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding early last month.

He had said that the Cabinet had ordered the Department of Environment to brief Kelantan State Executive Councillors on the extent of environmental damage in the highlands.

Menteri Besar Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat, responding to the Cabinet concern, said the State Government had never issued permits for logging activities in the highlands.

However, the New Straits Times team, with the aid of Orang Asli guides, found timber lorries, overloaded with logs, trundling the dirt tracks in the highlands.

The drivers paid no attention to the presence of the Press, suggesting they were oblivious to the uproar over the environmental damage in the highlands.

There were also fresh logs being left at several pick-up points, indicating that logging activities were rampant. There were no signboards to indicate the companies or individuals that had been given the concessions legally.

Bah Limau, 48, an elder of the Temiar tribe, who was born and brought up in the highlands, said the logging activities were rampant during the late 1980s, and slowed down in the last two years.

A Kelantan Forestry Department spokesman in Kota Baru declined comment when told of the NST's observations.

While the Kelantan Government recently announced the setting up of a task force to regulate development in the highlands, little or virtually nothing is being done to rehabilitate the scarred land.

Hills stripped of their trees were left bare and exposed to rain culminating in soil erosion. In a chain reaction, the rivers are clogged with soil, affecting their flow and eroding the banks.

Soil erosion is not confined to the highlands. Over the next several days, the NST team found that it also affects areas in Cameron Highlands and the Pahang border.

Landslides were also evident as the flow of the water from the hill top is not cushioned by undergrowth. Some Orang Asli settlements have been cut off from outside contact for days following landslips.

In some places, landslides bulldoze away tonnes of earth and their vegetation cover, exposing the deep veins of the hills and leaving permanent ugly scars on the landscape.

Even projects which were apparently approved by the Kelantan Government for State controlled-agencies like the Kelantan Economic Development Corporation do not appear to pay much attention to soil conservation measures.

While contractors were appointed to clear the hills of the trees, no effort seems to have been taken to ensure there is vegetation cover to prevent soil erosion.

Although Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had highlighted the environmental degradation in the highlands three years ago with the Cabinet expressing concern in May last year and last month, no enforcement appears to have been carried out.

The DOE says as many as 55 development and logging projects, covering a total area of 135,000 hectares, are being carried out there.

A primary school teacher at Pos Brooke, about five kilometres from the Kelantan-Pahang border, when told of the development being approved for the area, urged the State authorities to safeguard the environment.

"If the land clearing and logging are illegal, then, the State Government should take action. And if they are legal, their activities must be monitored.

"It took nature millions of years to create a place as beautiful and perfect as Lojing Highlands. Don't let the illegal loggers and farmers destroy it in a couple of years," said the teacher, who wanted to remain anonymous.

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