

13/06/1997

Upcoming wetland sanctuary set to be ecological watershed

Shareem Amry

HIGH hopes are riding on the Malaysian Wetland Sanctuary, with environmental experts placing their bets that it will spark a drive to establish a network of protected wetland areas throughout the country and the region.

The ambitious plan involves developing 5,000ha of degraded tin mine land, logged peat swamp forests, large open lakes and the Kuala Langat Permanent Peat Swamp forest into a nerve centre of research and education activities.

"It's the first project of this nature and magnitude in the Third World," said Wetlands International Asia Pacific chairman Anwar Faizal.

"It has made tremendous progress in assembling the right team, in attracting political commitment from key figures right to the very top and in assembling the core resources and the physical space."

The creation of the sanctuary comes at a time when the world is just waking up to the realisation that it can't afford to allow wetlands to disappear under the weight of development.

Although they only take up six per cent of the earth's surface, wetland areas harbour about 20 per cent of all known species and serve crucial environmental functions such as erosion and flood prevention.

Anwar, for one, thinks the sanctuary could go a long way in putting an end to an old ethic which ignored the value of wetland areas.

"Wetlands are under serious stress and many areas have been damaged. The devastation is apparent throughout Asia, and the sanctuary is important because it can herald a turning point towards a new respect," he said.

Eighty-six per cent of the wetland resources in France have been depleted, while Spain has lost about 60 per cent of its original wetland area.

Almost 70 per cent of the Philippines' mangrove resources vanished by 1980, while in California, Ohio, Iowa and Illinois in the United States, more than 85 per cent of the wetlands have been destroyed.

Malaysia has its own catalogue of sins. In April, the New Straits Times highlighted a huge gaffe at Tasik Chini, where a dam built in 1994 to raise the water level for ferrying purposes only caused the surrounding forest to be flooded, destroying 22ha of indigenous trees.

In south-west Johor, oil discharge from passing ships and tree-felling in the mangrove areas have damaged the swamp vegetation, which has long acted as a buffer zone for the Tanjung Piai coastline.

And in Sungai Pinang and the Penang coastal fishing area, uncontrolled trawling, aqua-culture, toxic waste pollution and land reclamation have all contributed to the depletion of fish stocks in the area.

In view of the mistakes already made, hopes are high that the sanctuary would focus conservation efforts and line up more sites nationwide to be ratified for protection under the Ramsar Convention.

The convention is a treaty under which governments nominate sites from a list of wetlands deemed to be of international importance. So far, Malaysia has nominated Tasik Bera in Pahang.

"There are potentially a lot of areas in the country that could be identified as Ramsar sites, such as mangrove areas along the Perak coast, and the Klias Peninsular in western Sabah," said Dr Isabelle Louis, deputy executive director of World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia.

"Malaysia is also a signatory to the Convention of Biological Diversity.

These are all international commitments and we are now responsible for meeting their requirements.

"Tasik Bera is an excellent start. Establishing a network of Ramsar sites in Malaysia is a process, and since land is a state matter, the onus is on the State Governments to support Malaysia's international agreements," she said.

The sanctuary, she added, would then complement the network of sites rather than stand alone as an isolated effort.

Completed plans for the sanctuary are expected to be presented to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad by mid-August while parts of the sanctuary will be opened by September next year.

An international workshop began on Tuesday to discuss the sanctuary's design, and the project got a huge boost and nod from the international community when the United Nations recently pledged RM42.5 million for the sanctuary's development.

That, and the news that the local financial and business community had pledged a further RM3.5 million, helped to alleviate fears that the sanctuary might be derailed even before it had a chance to get off the ground.

Concern was fuelled by news reports about sand mining causing serious damage to the area, although the Selangor State Government has pledged to put an end to it.

"The development of the sanctuary will be fraught with challenges and dangers," said Anwar. "There will be threats of misuse, overuse and a lack of understanding, so we must be watchful and alert."

Another concern is that the sanctuary would lose sight of its original objective and fall prey to the commercial or eco-tourism activities.

"We must keep the faith and ensure that all interactive elements with people must be kept in balance, with the whole concept of understanding a sensitive ecosystem in mind," said Anwar.

(END)