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Environs conservation mustn't be compromised in these times

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THE environmental implications of the economic crisis are receiving more attention of late, not only in Malaysia but the whole region.

During a downturn, the environment is usually accorded less priority as government resources are diverted to other more basic needs.

However, sustainable management of the environment should not be compromised as this would only bring about more problems in the long run. As past experiences have shown, the cost of cleaning up the environment is high.

Therefore, the proposed allocation of RM265 million under next year's Budget is seen as a positive move. The amount is significant considering the fact that the country is facing an economic downturn.

This is exactly why non-governmental organisations and environmentalists have stressed the need to optimise the use of the money.

The economic situation necessitates the need to prioritise and the implementation of effective and innovative approaches.

World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia's policy analyst Andrew Ng said the Government should channel most of the resources to enforcement.

This is to ensure pre-emptive action is taken to enforce the laws and to prevent the costly impact of environmental problems. It will reduce the need for pollution control and ensure natural resources are properly managed.

Ng said the environment has to be treated in much the same way as the economy, citing the tough stance taken by Bank Negara in curbing speculation and jump-starting the economy.

"More focus should be given to enforcement and proper management rather than monitoring," he said.

Former DOE director-general Tan Meng Leng feels the same way about studies. He says there is no point in carrying out more studies about the problems the country is facing.

What is needed now is implementation of programmes which can solve and prevent environmental degradation.

"We must remember that early implementation saves cost," said Tan.

Malaysian Nature Society chairman Datuk Dr Salleh Mohd Nor said prevention must involve creating awareness. And awareness is something that is sorely lacking in the country.

"We have enough projects on policies and we have enough consultancies. We need to go to the ground, look at the problems and tackle them.

"We need to increase awareness at the grassroots level, among the children and community," he said.

It is important for the people to be aware of the need to conserve and protect the environment. Everyone, including the developer and the manufacturer, must be sensitive towards the environment.

Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia adviser Gurmit Singh pointed out that it was important for the DOE to spend all the money allocated for the department.

In previous years, it had not fully utilised its allocations.

"What is the use of allocating money if the department is not making full use of it?" he asked.

Economic crises have an impact on the environment because people will be unwilling to pay for environmental improvement and industry will stop investing in cleaner technologies.

It also leads to unemployment and abject poverty. This is when the plundering of nature begins, worsening the exploitation of soil, forestry and fishery resources.

That was why Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in presenting the Budget, had stressed the need to conserve and protect natural resources particularly water catchments and forests.

These concerns were also mentioned in the National Economic Recovery Plan.

Moreover, the recent water crisis which affected thousands of people in various parts of the country had brought to the forefront the need to seriously conserve natural resources, especially forests and catchment areas.

Forests, apart from maintaining biodiversity and regulating the climate, are a vital component in sustaining water supply.

The extensive deforestation, especially around catchment areas, reflects how the importance of this resource is being neglected.

Due to the amount of degradation that has already taken place, Salleh said efforts should be made to rehabilitate forests.

"It is not enough to just protect forests. We have to look at all the areas which have been degraded," he said.

WWF's Ng said ensuring proper management of forests also meant tackling water shortage problems. This is because most of the catchment areas in Peninsular Malaysia are in forest reserves.

Forestry Department statistics show that of the 4.7 million hectares of forest reserves in the peninsula, 1.37 million hectares are classified as water catchment forests.

Of the 1.37 million hectares, more than 63 per cent are in productive forests where logging is allowed.

River management is just as essential when dealing with catchment areas. Ng said river reserves must be properly maintained and enforcement strict.

"Planning approach should be holistic and integrated in nature. Funds should be allocated to these activities," he added.

Local authorities must ensure proper land use by carefully planning the types of activities that can be allowed near and around rivers.

Haphazard development and ad hoc planning will only mean more pollution problems.

Due to financial limitations, it is best for local governments to work together with Federal agencies and non-governmental organisations in monitoring and enforcement activities.

A cut in spending allocation reduces public agencies' ability to monitor and protect the environment especially natural resources. Such a collaboration will not only help cut cost but will also ensure efforts are effective.

Salleh said perhaps it was time for the Government to introduce natural resource accounting which would provide economic value to natural resources. This ensures that the measure of the country's wealth will include environmental degradation and the loss of natural resources.

It must be realised that natural resource depletion carries a hidden cost. Future generations will be deprived of this crucial gift of nature which is irreplaceable.

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