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Feature: Forest

EVERGREEN, EVER TALL IS THE VISION FOR MALAYSIAN FOREST

By: Ali Mamat

KUALA LUMPUR: When Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir spelt out the country's Vision 2020 to make Malaysia a developed nation in 20 years' time, he also conveyed an image of a land with a clear and clean environment, unpolluted water and an evergreen forest able to re-generate itself while fueling national development.

That beautiful picture of gurgling brooks and lofty trees is not to be hung in the offices of those who go to the forests for a living -- it is a challenge for them to achieve an excellent standard of sustainable forest management (SFM) that calls for a re-definition of the current traditional concept and practices of forestry.

These people may be professional foresters, legislators, loggers or planters but they certainly have to sit down together to formulate a new approach of doing forest work together.

"Obviously the SFM and the long term development of the country's forestry sector require a comprehensive and integrated approach," said Deputy Minister of Primary Industries Datuk Anifah Aman at a recent gathering of members of the Institute of Foresters Malaysia (IRIM), here.

Anifah was obviously stating the obvious when he said there was a tendency even amongst professional foresters and policy-makers at present to be more concerned with their respective fields of interests, be it logging or bio-diversity or climatic change, when the fact is that all such areas are inextricably and symbolically linked.

Another guest at the gathering, Senator Rosli Mat Hassan, shared Anifah's view, saying that traditionally legislators saw forestry as merely a commodity, when in reality it also encompassed the arts, science and technology, environment, tourism and ecology.

ONE POLICY ONE PERMANENT FOREST COVER

Rosli, a graduate in forestry himself, said in order for the forest management to be fully integrated, all forest-related agencies should be guided by one policy, with the common objective of achieving the SFM.

At present, the Forestry Department which takes care of the timber resources is placed under the Ministry of Primary Industries, the Wildlife Department which protects the country's flora and fauna is under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, while the Drainage and Irrigation Department which also protects the rivers is under the Ministry of Agriculture.

Similarly, Rosli said, even state governments which have jurisdiction over land that includes forests, should also be guided and assisted in formulating their forestry policies and the granting of timber concessions.

To achieve this, he said the forestry department must maintain a complete and updated data-base on every sector of the Malaysian forest.

"All these reformation would help avoid mis-coordination among the parties working towards the achievement of SFM," said Rosli.

Anifah stressed that while political will is most important to solve forest-related problems, it was up to the experts and professionals to develop the strategies and to build the knowledge and capacity.

Forests, he said, must be seen not only as homes for indigenous people, sources of fuel for some people or amenities for recreation or eco-tourism. They are, in fact, the protector of watersheds that also helps to prevent avalanches, floods, landslides and mud-flows, while protecting

hydroelectric plants, irrigation and municipal water supplies.

FOREST HELPS KEEP HUMAN ALIVE

They also act as "sinks" and "reservoirs" for converting carbon dioxide through photosynthesis into oxygen needed to keep human alive, besides being home to a rich diversity of plants, animals and insects.

They are the key player in maintaining crucial ecological balances, such as the annual cycle of sediments and flood water needed for the production of agricultural crops to feed people.

The complexities of the tropical rainforests and their multiple roles are undoubtedly some of the major challenges facing professional foresters and other related interest groups.

"Thus, striking the right balance between forest production, environmental protection and the conservation of biological diversity is necessary if forests are to continue to play their essential economic, social, cultural and aesthetic roles," he added.

URBANIZATION A THREAT

"Increasing urbanization and land development have brought about widespread destruction of the water environment, while poorly regulated land clearing for housing and industrial development is a major contributor of pollution to natural waterways in the country," said Anifah.

However, Anifah said, several corrective measures had been taken by the authorities to ensure the successful achievement of forestry goals, including the amendment in 1993 to the National Forestry Act 1984, to further strengthen enforcement and to curb encroachment.

It was also to ensure optimum natural regeneration of forests, while producing a sustained supply of timber and clean water, as well as ensuring ecological stability and the maintenance of biological diversity.

Malaysia's forest resources are also protected in areas delineated as Permanent Reserved Forests (PRF), as spelt out in the 1978 National Forestry Policy. Until last year, a total of approximately 14.3 million hectares have been gazetted under the category.

Accordingly, Malaysia also supports policies that seek to stem the degradation of watersheds, hillsides and other such areas by undertaking land conservation schemes and providing incentives and resources for land conservation.

Malaysia is also committed to the maintenance of a regularly updated information on its forest resources and ensuring a minimum forest cover, undertaking reforestation and afforestation programs, silviculturally treating selected logged-over forests and creating financial mechanisms to make available additional resources to forest conservation projects.

EXPECTATIONS A HINDRANCE TO SFM

However, the task of SFM is made increasingly difficult and complex by the emergence of many new challenges such as the growing socio-economic expectations, the finite size of the resource base and the requirements of forest management and timber certification.

In this respect, Anifah said, Malaysia was now in the process of implementing a certification scheme which is consistent with Malaysia's commitment to achieve the International Tropical Timber Organization's objective of SFM.

"We have formulated the Malaysian Criteria, Indicators, Activities and Standard of Performance for Forest Management as the national standard to be used for the certification scheme operated by the Malaysian National Timber Certification Council," Anifah said.

Towards this end, greatly increased scientific knowledge of how forests

function as well as the know-how to develop an integrated forest resource management information system can contribute to more effective monitoring and better planning.

"The manpower of the future will have to be trained and multi-skilled, flexible, innovative and creative, while foresters must be qualified, dedicated and motivated to take up the challenges of SFM," said Anifah.

The concept of SFM too has to be changed to encompass the wider issues of the ecological and social functions of forests, of which timber production is of the many.

Both Anifah and Rosli proposed that IRIM take the initiative as a professional body to formulate a vision and mission for the sustainable development of the forestry sector in tandem with SFM.

They also called for a paradigm shift among professional foresters, from just being mere regulators of forest produce to managers of other uses of the forest associated with soil and climatic stability, water resources, conservation of biodiversity and environmental harmony. -- Bernama

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