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Stopping highlands damage

BUILDING something is difficult but destroying it is easy. It takes many years of evolution for Mother Nature to nurture into shape a hill with all its beautiful attractions but all it takes is just a few years and man's avarice to destroy its beauty.

Cameron Highlands has been for years a getaway for families to enjoy its cool air and natural beauty. But the extent of forest clearing in the region has reached such alarming proportions that the Cabinet has decided to review new development projects there pending a study to be undertaken by a committee on Malaysia's sensitive highland areas.

The indiscriminate land clearing at Cameron Highlands is not new as it has been highlighted in the media and complaints had been raised by environmental groups as well as individuals over the dire consequences of such clearing in the past.

In fact, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself had previously expressed his concern over the adverse ecological damage arising from land clearing in the country's highlands.

Despite such expressions of concern from diverse quarters, the forest clearing of highlands has continued unabated. This is partly because of the greed of developers and the possible connivance or inability of the state authorities - which have control of land and natural resources - to curb ill-planned resort and tourism development, illegal farming and logging.

In principle, it is good to promote the country's highlands to tourists, whether domestic or foreign, but we should not sacrifice the ecological well being of the highlands in the pursuit of the tourist ringgit.

A person may be able to afford an expensive bungalow on a hill slope and admire the view from there but the question is whether the present and future generations should pay the price of the environmental damage.

Farmers who are desperate for land to plant crops to boost their agricultural output could elicit some sympathy but their illegal forest clearing cannot be condoned because of the eventual environmental damage to the hills which could ultimately affect their farming activities as a result of soil erosion.

If the illegal and indiscriminate forest clearing has been going on partly because of lack of enforcement, then the agencies involved should be told to buck up and do what is necessary.

The Cabinet decision is timely because we should not wait for major disasters to occur and many lives lost and a hue and cry made before something drastic is done to curb the degradation of highlands.

It is wiser that action be taken now to prevent any more ecological damage to the country's highlands than for accusations of neglect to be hurled against the Government later when something untoward happens.

The alarm bells have been set ringing by satellite data which showed that the forest coverage of Cameron Highlands had fallen by two per cent, from 54,597 hectares in 1991 to 53,484 hectares in 2000. The data also indicated that 22 per cent of Cameron Highlands was developed for temperate agricultural activities and about 312 hectares or two per cent of the land developed were on slopes of more than 25 degrees.

Not only this, as another problem has emerged. Forest clearing is chiefly responsible for silt deposition which affects electrical power generation in Cameron Highlands and costly, too, because it will require

RM18 million yearly to remove the silt at the Sultan Abu Bakar Dam in Ringlet. The temperature, too, has been affected, with a recorded increase of 0.7 degrees Celsius every 100 years.

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