

PM to open 1st phase of Paya Indah Wetlands Sat

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VISITORS to the Paya Indah Wetlands would be greeted with a sea of pink and red coloured lotus but beneath the large expanse of dotting lakes and tracts of land work is hectically going around the clock in time for its opening this Saturday.

Come October 13, Malaysia's first premier eco-tourism destination will be officially opened by the Prime Minister and Malaysians from all walks of life will have the chance to experience the best in Asian wildlife.

At the same time the public will be exposed to real life wetland conservation efforts at a sprawling site situated near Dengkil, some 45 minutes drive from Kuala Lumpur, 20 minutes away from KL International Airport and just 15 minutes from the F1 Circuit in Sepang.

The Paya Indah Wetlands is the culmination of a six-year effort and the fruit of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's vision in wanting to create a wetlands not only to preserve the fast-shrinking and neglected part of the ecological system but above all to show to the world that Malaysia is more than capable of managing its own environment.

Adding value to what was once a degraded former tin mining land has been the uppermost consideration in every step of the wetlands rehabilitation project.

Despite the barrage of criticisms from consumer and environmental groups the project has now taken shape to a stage where snide remarks no longer matter because the wetlands has now been transformed into the pride of the nation.

The 3100-ha site will offer a variety of wildlife from different parts of the world and a wide range of activities to boot once the whole project is completed in the next two and half years.

For a start the first phase covering some 450ha will be almost completed by the time the wetlands opens its doors to the public.

Overseeing every aspect of the project is Muralee Menon, chief executive officer of Paya Indah Wetlands, who took a group of journalists from the NSTP Group for a media tour recently.

For a mere low entrance fee of RM5 during week days and RM7 during weekends, visitors would be guided to an exploration centre where they would get first-hand education on the importance of water and tin mining history in Kuala Langat.

Children will have the chance to learn the different texture of clay, sand and peat soil and get a feel of what a peat swamp forest looks like.

Right in the middle of the centre is a boulder specially brought from Sungai Selangor where the Prime Minister

"We hope to change our exhibits every six months so that this place would be lively and exciting," Muralee said.

Even the variety of the fauna and flora found here is breathtaking.

All in the wetlands play host to some 213 species of birds, many of which are migratory and 19 types of fish apart from 34 species of wildlife and 220 species of aquatic and terrestrial plants.

The most recent addition to the family of wildlife introduced in the wetlands is a group of four Nile Hippopotami specially airlifted from Botswana.

Anglers will be able to enjoy their favourite past time for a fee of only RM15 per person per fishing rod and what more, they can even take home whatever amount their catch for the day.

The slow and tedious effort of rehabilitating a once denuded and environmentally exploited ecosystem began in 1996.

Today, the wetlands is teeming with all kinds of fish in its 14 lakes and a garden of what is going to constitute one of the best collection of palm trees in the region, if not the world, is slowly taking shape on a hill.

Palms such as the royal, cabbage, bottle, cucuala, fish tail, sealing wax cycas and mycrozamia will be planted and even a mini-oil palm plantation will be created as a showcase of Malaysia's premier export product.

"We are also working on a bamboo garden which will bring together many exciting varieties of bamboo from all over the world," Muralee said.

He added that there will be guided tours for visitors who can also buy a booklet which will feature the various varieties of fauna and flora in the wetlands.

Keeping as close as possible to what a wetlands should be, all roads in Paya Indah Wetlands are not tarred but are of compact crusher run type and there will also be no motorised vehicles allowed on them.

According to Muralee, Tenaga Nasional Bhd has agreed to donate five electric trams worth RM1 million in the next three months, each of which is capable of carrying 50 passengers.

For visitors who want to spend more time to experience what the wetlands has to offer there are 34 affordable chalets build at the fringes of the lakes, giving guests a spectacular view of the myriads of wildlife inhabiting the wide body of water.

Travelling to and fro the unique tatched-roof locally-designed chalets is via buggies and guests can also enjoy boat and kayak rides to get from one lake to another.

Several lakes are designated specially for the hippopotami and crocodiles and plans are currently underway to build areas fenced-up areas to house peat swamp deer from India, herons

able and for RM10 one can take a horse cart ride around the various facilities available.

There are mountain bikes for rental at a minimal rate of RM3 throughout the day for those who want to have the added adventure of traversing the quarry dust roads.

For those whose can only dream of ever going to experience an African Safari trip fret no more because the wetlands will make your dreams come true.

Once the African Plains Safari is completed on a 648-ha site in about two and half years time it would be wetlands' "jewel in the crown" and certainly rivals and excels any safari offering in the region.

"We will have night safari and we are not talking about just one or two giraffes, rhinoceros and antelopes but herds of them.

"We are also building tree-top houses for safari-goers to view animals at the watering holes and see the migration pattern among the animals according to the availability of water and food," Muralee added.

Parallel to the safari, Paya Indah Wetlands will also develop a savannah area in the vicinity of a disused tin dredge donated by Petaling Tin Bhd where visitors traversing the area will be able to see free ranging animals confined in a moat system.

The whole wetlands will require a total investment of about RM600 million, half of which comes from a Government grant.

Help from the Japan International Cooperation Agency has come handy in the form of a RM300,000 financial aid and technical expertise worth RM1 million.

So far some RM90 to RM100 million has been spent in the first phase alone and the wetlands is expected to reap an annual turnover of some RM52 million or RM1 million a week.

One important aspect of the wetlands' functions is its role as a catchment area.

A treatment plant at the wetlands is able to process up to 100,000 gallons of water daily with a storage capacity of 60,000 gallons.

"The lakes hold a total of some 43 million cu litres of water and they act as a very crucial source of water in the surrounding areas in times of dry weather," Muralee explained.

Accessibility is paramount if the wetlands is to be a popular tourist spot and the Government has approved the construction of a connecting road from Putrajaya, Muralee said.

"We want to make Paya Indah Wetlands as the most important centre for Asian wildlife in the world, incorporating not only the kind of wildlife but