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Don't get carried away with environmental cause, NGOs told

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Non-governmental organisations should not get carried away with the environmental cause to the extent of sacrificing the economy to benefit those who are already wealthy.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the reality was that foreigners, in particular their NGOs, wanted developing countries to preserve their forests as a "carbon sink" for them.

Forests were needed to absorb the carbon dioxide produced in huge amounts by them, but they did not consider the needs of the people of developing countries, he said.

At the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry, Dr Mahathir said that while Malaysia had to preserve its forests, it also needed to use its resources.

"The forest is our wealth. We are not a rich country. We need to use forest resources, especially timber, to develop our economy and also to clear it to make room for our growing population.

"We also need forests as a water catchment area for hydro-electric projects and for agriculture."

He said that since the rich countries had destroyed their forests, it was not fair for them to force developing countries to make sacrifices so that they could live in comfort.

He added that Malaysian forests were well maintained.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysian forests were rich in biodiversity and held great potential for the biotechnology industry.

He said Malaysia must be on guard to ensure that its wealth was not exploited by foreigners who smuggled out samples for research which would bring them immense wealth.

"We must work with researchers from other countries to compile all the data and samples pertaining to the 'genome' (of our living things) in the country."

He said the Government had set up Biovalley Malaysia, a cluster of biotechnology industries and supporting services, within the Multimedia Super Corridor to tap this potential.

He also told the ministry's officials to be more sympathetic to scientists when it came to allocating research and development funds.

"They should have a positive attitude towards the scientists' applications," he said, but acknowledged that it was difficult to assess ideas and the potential of any research.

The Prime Minister, however, said while most research would not bear fruit and the money might seem wasted, there would be a few that would bring returns and the rewards would be huge.

He said the success of a race depended on their innovativeness and willingness to find ways to become better and more productive.

He added that those who were successful in science must be "curious", and not orthodox.

"People cannot move forward if they merely repeat what had been done by their ancestors."

Giving examples of the immense progress of some industries, including telecommunications, he said this was the result of "curiosity" and a desire to improve.

He said Malaysians must absorb this culture of curiosity, expressing pride in those who had won awards at the annual Geneva International

Inventions Exhibition.

Dr Mahathir, however, said the ability to invent must be matched with the ability to market the invention. Commercialisation required the skills of marketing and business administration.

"We know that many research findings, including those by Mardi, had not been commercialised.

"But this should not discourage us, rather greater efforts should be taken to improve on our inventions."