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Paya Indah Wetlands' rehabilitation complete

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DENKIL, Fri. - The Paya Indah Wetlands today is a far cry from the degraded state it was in when the first attempts to salvage its natural beauty were launched several years ago.

The park celebrates its first anniversary this Sunday, after opening up to the public last October 13.

The recovery from exmining land to eco-tourism showpiece has also been about nature's ability to heal herself, with a little bit of help from man.

The 3,100-hectare park sits on State land and was at one time a tin mining site before illegal clay miners dug up the area.

"The land was barren, scarred and clayey," said Wetlands chief executive officer Muralee Menon, recalling the state of the land in 1996 when rehabilitation first started.

"It had suffered from tin and clay mining, logging and fires. The lakes were contaminated. But we saw the potential it had."

To rehabilitate the area, all sorts of expertise were required.

For nearly seven years until the Park opened last year, experts in soil, hydrology, biology, wildlife, landscaping and engineering laboured on the land, nudging it back to health.

Rehabilitation work, plus the fittings to turn it into an eco-tourism park with facilities cost almost RM90 million, Muralee said.

The Park contains 14 lakes which collectively hold 43 million cubic metres of water, roughly the amount of water in 17,000 Olympic-size swimming pools.

Today, Paya Indah Wetlands has many species of birds, including raptors, that visitors can spot early in the morning or late in the afternoon.

The park is also home to animals from other lands, such as four hippopotami from Botswana and cranes from China.

Muralee expects the park to receive up to 120,000 visitors by year's end.

The Park also offers various family and educational activities, such as batik painting, exhibits on wetlands, guided nature tours, boating, cycling and horse-riding.

Electric trams sponsored by Tenaga Nasional Bhd, and luxury chalets will be launched this Sunday.

With the Park now established, Muralee is focused on improving its competitiveness as a player in the recreation services industry.

"We need to have more products, like having better packages for visitors, improving merchandising, and perhaps even more wildlife," he said, adding that he hoped to create a safaristyle attraction.

However, the immediate challenges are to maintain the Park and to train the 70 staff members.

"I would make that a priority for our second year. We are in the service industry and should never rest on current achievements."

Muralee said the Park's success is also due to the strong support from the private sector.

Various companies had chipped in to initiate the rehabilitation work in 1996.

Now, besides the electric trams from TNB, Telekom Malaysia Bhd also has a role in the park by sponsoring the upkeep of the four hippopotami.

Muralee said he hoped the private sector would also play a more active

role in environmental education, not only through donations alone, but by raising awareness and increasing public participation, since Paya Indah is a good place to instil environmental awareness.

"I hope the private sector will look at how their staff can participate in raising public awareness, for example, by facilitating a school programme."

Work on the Wetlands was first undertaken by the Malaysian Wetland Foundation, with support from then Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is the foundation's patron, while Tan Sri Razali Ismail is chairman.

Though Muralee is now often the frontman for the Park, he still remembers the inspirational roles Dr Mahathir and Daim played to get it started.

"Today, Paya Indah is recognised as an environmental showcase and a strong tourism product," he said.