

# Communing with nature

**FEELING GOOD:** Dr Mahathir in the garden of his Perdana Leadership Foundation office in Putrajaya. 'I cannot describe the feeling but communing with nature makes me feel good' — STARpic by AZHAR MAHROF

BY AUDREY EDWARDS

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**O**NE routine that Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad keeps every time he is at the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya is to feed his fish when he arrives and leaves for the day.

And he has been known to enquire quietly about them if the water in the outdoor pond where the koi fish are kept turns slightly murky.

His office, a two-storey structure on a cape overlooking the lake, blends in well with the environment and in a way allows the former Prime Minister to commune with nature.

"I cannot describe the feeling but communing with nature makes me feel good," he said.

Thus issues related to nature and the environment remain close to his heart.

In an interview, Dr Mahathir said: "Like everybody else, I want to preserve the environment but within limits. We cannot preserve the environment to the extent where people have no place to live. Therefore, you have to build high-rise buildings and end up having too many people living in one place. I am sad because of this congestion."

He voiced his disappointment over the fact that Malaysians are still not conscious enough about the environment.

"Malaysians must be conscious and report whatever abuses they see," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that one should not be fanatical about preserving the environment but it should be viewed in the context of the need for living space while preserving our environmental heritage.

"We must accept that we cannot be total. Today in Malaysia, 70% of our land is covered with trees. Out of this, 50% is natural forest and another 20% tree plantations. We are not that bad compared to other countries. We are not that damaged.

"But we have to be vigilant in preserving our environment," he said.

On the Paya Indah Wetlands, which was started during his tenure but was shut down recently, Dr Mahathir said that this happened because "money was not available".

He stressed that the wetlands were specially created to preserve the flora and fauna in Putrajaya.

On the issue of enforcement, Dr Mahathir said the problem is that the public expected only those in authority to do the work.

"Others think it is not their duty. Therefore, they take no notice of it. Those who are concerned complain in the press.

"When I used to fly by helicopter to places, if I noticed a clearing in the hills, I would raise it in the Cabinet. Sometimes, there is haze in Kuala Lumpur. This is because people are not reporting or complaining about open burning," he said.

On concerns that the Tioman Island marina and airport project might destroy the island's key attractions, the corals and marine life, Dr Mahathir, who is adviser to the Tioman Development Authority said:

"It is not good having something beautiful which people cannot see. It is like a woman wearing purdah, beautiful but cannot be seen. You have to go there to see the beauty. Without good facilities you cannot go there and you cannot see the beautiful coral and marine life.

"Therefore, you need to sacrifice a small part for the very extensive coral area. Corals are beautiful. But what is the good if nobody can see it?"

Dr Mahathir said the appreciation of nature and the environment must be inculcated in the very young.

However, he said, such education must go beyond the classroom and students should be taken to places where they could appreciate nature for themselves.