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Will it be allowed to be a botanical garden?

By Sarah Sabaratnam

TAMAN Botani, a forest reserve, was originally slated to be a botanical garden but that didn't happen. Residents of Kota Damansara and neighbouring housing areas now fear that the forest will make way for bungalow lots. SARAH SABARATNAM reports.

WHEN the authorities are overtly secretive about the status of a piece of land, one wonders what is going on.

Take, for instance, the forest reserve in Kota Damansara, now known as the Taman Botani travesty.

This plot of forest was previously part of the Sungai Buloh Forest Reserve. In 1898 it was gazetted as the first forest reserve in Malaysia.

Heritage wise, this forest is monumental.

Ecologically, it is a biodiversity haven, with lowland forest species such as keruing and meranti dominating the hilly terrain, and 227 species of birds including the elusive Black Hornbill and the globally threatened Masked Finfoot calling it home.

Eight species of mammals and 25 species of reptiles have also been recently recorded as its habitants.

Located along the North South Expressway, opposite the Jalan Duta exit in Kuala Lumpur, the reserve was degazetted in the early 1990s for a housing development project.

Now, when a forest is degazetted, the Forestry Department should be consulted. The department would then give its feedback as to the pros and cons of developing the forest reserve.

Rumour has it that when the Sungai Buloh Forest Reserve was degazetted, the Forestry Department was not consulted, for political expediency.

However, as the rumour goes, the then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped in and insisted that part of the forest be spared from development for conservation purposes.

As a result, 405 hectares were retained and alienated for a National Botanical Garden. A masterplan was drawn up for the gardens but nothing transpired.

As of June 2002, the status of the forest remained as "Taman Botani".

The rest of the forest, 1,215ha in all, was made state land, through Selangor's investment arm, Perbandanan Kemajuan Negeri Selangor (PKNS).

PKNS parcelled out plots of this land for housing.

Brochures for housing in this area come with a promise that there will be a botanical garden in the area.

In fact, the brochure for Kota Damansara describes it as a neighbourhood which balances development with nature. There is a map of the development masterplan in the brochure, and in it a large area has been marked as "Taman Botani".

Residents say that those who bought land immediately adjacent to the forest paid a premium.

Unfortunately, last year rumours arose that the remaining 405ha known as Taman Botani would make way for luxury bungalows.

Residents from Kota Damansara and surrounding areas such as Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Tropicana and Bandar Utama are up in arms as they have all become attached to the forest.

"We need a good green lung like this in the area," says Zainudin Tahir, 49, from the Kota Damansara residents' association. "There is no real forest like this nearby. This forest is connected to several

neighbourhoods and the communities want it to be preserved."

"We want this place to be retained, as promised (in the brochure)," says John Hung, 38, from Kota Damansara's Section 10 residents' association.

"Living next to the forest was the developer's sales pitch. The theme was living with the environment. Now they want to change it? Where else can you stay next to a forest? It was a very attractive pitch they made to us. So they should retain it. We don't want to live in a concrete jungle," he says.

According to K.H. Leong, president of the pro-tem committee for the eight residents' associations in the area, letters to the state government and to Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohamad Khir Toyo querying the status of the forest reserve and future plans for it have gone unanswered.

However, a letter to the Prime Minister recently resulted in a letter being written to the committee by the state government.

"Unfortunately, the letter explained that the plans for a botanical garden have been transferred to Bukit Cerakah in Shah Alam."

The state government has obviously missed the point, says Leong.

"We want this forest here, to be retained as it is, here. It can be turned into a community forest park, as we are proposing, to be utilised by the public. It is not about Selangor having a botanical garden. That is another issue," he says.

Besides, says S.S. Singam, director of the Selangor Forestry Department between 1981 and 1991, Bukit Cerakah became an agricultural park, not a botanical garden.

As a forester himself for many years, he proposes that the Taman Botani in Sungai Buloh be retained as a biodiversity reserve.

"Malaysia is known for its biodiversity. So keep this forest for that purpose. You don't have to turn it into a Kew Gardens, but you can have trails and the trees can be labelled for educational purposes, explaining the utilisation potential," he says.

Francis Tan, from the Taman Tun Dr Ismail Residents' Association, says there is a strong demand in the area for such a community forest park.

"A few thousands go to Bukit Kiara every morning. How much more potential will this place have as a forest park for the community! People love places like this. People are also more health conscious and they want to go for walks, but the existing places for this such as the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia are already saturated."

Tan says he is confused as to why the Government does not want to meet the people's aspirations.

The residents want the forest as a community forest park so much that they are proposing to undertake all primary work of developing, funding and maintaining the park.

The proposed park is said to be able to cater to some 250,000 residents immediately and much more in the near future.

"Just Kota Damansara alone will have 450,000 residents when it is fully occupied," says Hung, basing the figures on the development masterplan.

Meanwhile, Member of Parliament for Subang Tan Sri K.S. Nijhar has called on the state government to fully disclose the facts.

"Let's be transparent. The facts should be very clear. Is the forested area known as Taman Botani going to remain as it is? Can it be turned into a community forest park as desired by the residents, or is it going to be turned into a housing development? There is much confusion among the residents as to the status of this land. They need to know the facts."

He also says he will raise this matter in Parliament.

Leong says he will be pleased if the state government is transparent on the matter. "We are thanking the government by putting up a banner," he said.

Last month, just before the elections, the Selangor State Government told reporters it will not renege on its promise to preserve Taman Botani.

Datuk Mohd Mokhtar Ahmad Dahalan, Selangor state exco for Local Government, Housing, Squatters and Environment, said Taman Botani will be left as it is even though the area around it is developing at a fast pace.

He also told reporters that an EIA report will be conducted to see the feasibility of turning the area into a community forest park, as requested by the residents.

The residents have meanwhile, obtained a US\$100,000 (RM380,000) grant from the United Nations Development Programme to turn Taman Botani into a community forest park of their dreams.

Let's hope the state government, in keeping to the principle that development should meet the aspirations of the people, will meet them halfway.

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