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From pristine hill resort to a wasteland

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GONE are the "gentle slopes and plateau land with round hills shut in all around by loftier ranges". Gone are the "streams that glide along easily" feeding the once mighty Sungai Telom.

The death knell for that description of Cameron Highlands was sounded probably from the moment it was identified as the perfect colonial hill station by a British government surveyor William Cameron in 1885, but never has the picture looked so pock-marked as it does now.

In 16 short years, the temperature in Cameron Highlands has risen 1.4 degrees Celsius.

Meteorological Department statistics show the highest maximum temperature has increased 1.6 degrees Celsius and the minimum temperature by 0.4 degrees between 1984 and 2000.

To the average man, this hardly makes an impact, but it is significant in Cameron Highlands, where once cardigan-clad residents now walk around in T-shirt and shorts.

Houses now have ceiling fans - unthinkable in the 1950s when the ground used to be iced over early in the morning.

Even the rainy days have dropped - from 74 per cent in 1984 to 66 per cent in 2000.

"If this climate change continues, then the whole ecology can change. It could affect the productivity of tea and flowers as well as the types of crops cultivated here," says Malaysian Nature Society president Datuk Dr Salleh Mohd Nor.

Cameron Highlands' forest cover in the upper catchment areas of Plau, Telom and Bertam has dwindled from 95 per cent to 62 per cent between 1947 and 1997 - a loss of 10,599 hectares, Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia figures show.

In the same period, farm land grew tenfold; from 291 hectares to 3,048 hectares. Unfortunately, much of the expansion was on steep land, says WWF executive director Datuk Dr Mikail Kavanagh Abdullah.

Climate changes, a history of landslides and numerous scars marking hills have done little to scare would-be farmers and developers. They haven't scared authorities either; at least not as much as reports in the Press have - a fact amply demonstrated by recent events in Cameron Highlands.

In March last year, five projects were approved by the Cameron Highlands District Office. They were among the eight projects frozen in 2001, pending a year-long assessment on the impact of development on Cameron Highlands by the Cabinet Committee on Highland and Island Development.

Residents and environmental groups were distraught as this spelt only one thing: the issuance of land-clearing permits. It would throw the highlands into the abyss of continuing degradation.

As residents scurried about collecting signatures for a petition to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding on Aug 18, their worst fears were realised.

A contractor for the developer of one of those five projects had moved heavy machinery to the project site, once part of the Mentigi Forest Reserve.

The New Sunday Times visited the area after being alerted by some residents and found the contractor had used a heavy chain excavator and

had secured a one-kilometre access road in just 24 hours.

When asked about it three days later, District Officer Haron Abdul Kader assured residents saying the project was in accordance with Cabinet committee guidelines and several conditions had been imposed on developers before they were allowed to resume land-clearing works.

Among these were a ban on use of heavy machinery for land-clearing, a ban on works on Class IV slopes, categorised as having a gradient of 35 degrees or more; and the construction of silt traps before the project commenced.

The conditions applied to all the five projects which were allowed to proceed.

But five months later, under the very noses of the authorities, heavy machinery was once again being used to clear a vast tract of land in the Blue Valley. This, despite two stop-work orders issued against the project developer Deng Seng Enterprises Sdn Bhd, a conglomerate of seven companies.

The ensuing news reports and pictures caused not only a stir, but a re-freeze of all development projects in the highlands.

When asked, Deng Seng director Kwang Keh Chong said it was unfair that the company had to stop work as the Cameron Highlands District Council had approved plans for the project and issued a permit before work began in late December.

This could mean one of two things - that the development proposal did not fully spell out the kind of land clearing to be conducted, or the approving party was informed of the nature of clearing but the project was approved, nevertheless.

When contacted later for more information on the conditions in the company's landclearing permit, Kwang refused to divulge anything, saying that he was waiting to hear from the authorities.

The initiated know that land-clearing permits in Cameron Highlands are generally not issued by the Cameron Highlands District Council, but by the District Officer.

And according to a former Land Office staff, this permit stipulates the period in which clearing work has to be completed.

Therefore, he points out, the case in Blue Valley raises questions for the District Officer to answer.

For instance, whether or not the 24-hectare land owned by Deng Seng, which was once part of the Blue Valley tea plantation, had undergone conversion of condition (from tea plantation to vegetable cultivation) as required under Section 124 of the National Land Code.

Had the Cameron Highlands Land Office approved anymore Temporary Occupation Licence applications during the freeze? Had the District Officer tried his level best in getting every piece of information that was needed before he approved the projects?

Had the District Officer, from time to time, visited the area approved for development to check on the progress of land-clearing?

To answer these and other questions, the New Sunday Times contacted the Pahang Land and Mines Department. The answer was not encouraging.

Deputy Director (I) Ramlah Lani said the Blue Valley situation was a sensitive one and that "it is important (for NST) to get the authorisation of either Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob or State Secretary Datuk Abdul Rahim Abdul before we (the department) can release the information".

Several attempts to contact Haron over the questions were futile. Even requests for an interview went unanswered.

The fact that rules are breached, slopes are levelled, forest lost and authorities unwilling to explain - are any of these really surprising?

Over 70 years ago, the Pahang State Government was questioned about its ability to administer this famous hill station, as reports in The Straits Times in July 1935 showed.

There was even a petition at that time to have the administration of Cameron Highlands transferred from Pahang to the Federation (the Federated Malay States).

At the time, the question was whether they had the resources and the ideas necessary to realise the highland's full potential.

It's ironic that the question now is quite the opposite - have they done too much, to ill-effect?

Can Pahang do better this time?