

Illegal use of reserve

COMMUNITY

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ENCROACHMENT of Selangor forest land believed to be much more extensive than that of the now rehabilitated Raja Musa forest reserve has been discovered at Kampung Sungai Kelambu, near the Kuala Langat forest reserve.

The peat swamp forest is believed to be exploited as early as the 1980s.

StarMetro had received complaints and tip-off from the people in the area, saying that they saw smoke inside the forest reserve, and they wondered if it was open burning taking place.



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stones, rocks and pebbles along the 6km long stream.

At the entrance to the area, there were signboards indicating the boundaries of the forest reserve, with a warning that encroachers could be fined up to RM10,000 or jailed up to three years.

The warning, however, has not deterred the encroachers who had nonchalantly set up camps there.

Forest trees were replaced with rows and rows of oil palm trees, almost like an oil palm plantation.

At the edge of the cultivated area, the StarMetro team had to get out of the car and go in on foot, where plants like tapioca, ginger, turmeric and galangal were being cultivated on a large tract of land.

There is a drainage system built for irrigation and also holes dug near each other to extract water for watering purposes.

A Chinese man and some Indonesian workers were seen loading several big bags of tapioca onto a lorry, ready to be transported to a factory in Tanjung Sepat.

According to the man, who identified himself as Toh Ah Lek, he knows that the reserve land belongs to the government but does not consider his activities as illegal.

“I am not robbing a bank or anything to get money. This is a way of earning an income as we are just harvesting our ‘fruits of labour’ to be sold,” the 60-year-old Toh said.

He said he had been working on the land for many years, since his younger days.

Asked if he was not afraid of the forestry authorities summoning him, he said it might even be good if that happened as he would then be able to stop working.

Several wooden shacks stand in the midst of the vast vegetation area, obviously to house the immigrant workers.

According to Indonesian worker Bambang, his Chinese employer owns 40 acres of land to plant ginger, galangal, tapioca and sweet corn.

“I came to this place more than 11 years ago with my boss. At that time, it was still a forest but later some of these areas were subjected to open burning, as the farmers began to gradually open up more land. Burning helps make the soil fertile for planting,” he said.

Bambang said a capital of RM7,000 was needed to clear the land and to pay workers for planting ginger.

He said his boss was now enjoying good income from his investment as the ginger was exported daily to Singapore.

“My salary is about RM1,000 a month and I send half of it back home,” he said.



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Bambang said there was more forest land that could be cleared if people were interested in investing in the plantation sector.

A Chinese smallholder, who has a plot to plant sweet potatoes, said he ventured into the forest two years ago after finding out about the income-earning opportunity from his friends.

“I know that this is a forest reserve but I don’t know that what I am doing is wrong,” Ng Thian Chaye said.

Apparently, what the StarMetro team discovered is just the tip of the iceberg, as the site they visited is just one small part of a huge encroached area.

Sources told StarMetro that more than 100 permits were issued to various individuals during the previous state administration as a temporary occupational licence (TOL) for usage of forest land.

Obviously, something is not very right when permits are given for commercial cultivation in the forest reserve, which is supposed to be a protected natural heritage.

When contacted, Selangor state forestry department officers declined to comment, saying that their top management would resolve the matter.

Department assistant director (operations and enforcement) Mohd Yussainy Md Yusop said they were preparing papers on the matter for the state government to decide on the course of action to take.

From satellite imaging via Google Earth, it is believed that the forest reserve covers about 5,000ha.

The department admitted that nearly 600ha of it had been encroached.

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