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Thursday, 19 May 2016

Keeping a close watch on peatland

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On their rounds: (From left) Forest guard Aszhar Alias, Global Environment Centre programme officer Saiful Anuar Zulkaarnain, Friends of North Selangor Peat Swamp Forest president Sariat Kadot, GEC Forest and Coastal Programme coordinator Nagarajan Rengasamy looking at oil palm trees in a plantation near the Raja Muda Forest Reserve that were burnt in April.

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AFTER years of battling smoke and haze from peatland fires in Kuala Selangor, the local community rallied together to successfully bring down fires by 90%.

Tired of fearing the unknown, some 40 volunteers stepped up to join a community-based

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establishment called the Friends of North Selangor Peat Swamp Forest (FNPSF).

The collaborative effort with residents living at the fringes of Raja Musa Forest Reserve in Kuala Selangor was spurred by Global Environment Centre (GEC), Selangor State Forestry Department and several other state agencies, including Kuala Selangor District Office and District Council.

Comprising four villages – Kampung Ampangan, Kampung Seri Tiram Jaya, Kampung Raja Musa and Kampung Bestari Jaya – FNPSF is a registered community-based organisation.

Its president, Sariat Kadot, said many villagers had fallen ill in the past because of breathing in smoke from the fires.

Peat fires are one of the most difficult to manage and are caused by human error as opposed to the heat during a drought, as commonly misconstrued.

GEC director Faizal Parish said peats were open swamps between rivers some 7,000 years ago and when sea levels rose and flooded into the coastal lowland, it created the shallow swamps.



According to Parish, peats were open swamps between rivers some 7,000 years ago and when the sea levels rose and back flooded into the coastal lowland, the shallow swamps were created.

"The swamp plants start to grow and accumulate dead plant material that contains organic acids, so it doesn't break down easily by bacteria. This accumulated over the last 7,000 to 8,000 years to form a 10m-thick peat deposit," he said.

"The peats act as a sponge, absorbing water in the wet season and release it during the dry spell, making it important for water regulation, water supply and flood control.

"Most of the time, man-made drains and canals dug up in the past to harvest peat forest timber drained the water from the peats, leaving the land dry and susceptible to fires," he explained.

The old drains are now being closed off to raise the water tables and ensure the peat soil is damp, but it has made it an ideal fishing spot for anglers.

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Bird enthusiasts also come in and catch birds, leaving behind lit cigarettes and campfires that lead to fires.

Most of the time, however, fires started outside the forest boundary because of land clearing for crop cultivation.

Some have lost their crops and oil palm trees after failing to detect the fires at an early stage, forcing the smallholders to fork out more cash to replace the burnt trees.

FNSPSF, said Sariat, was their way of ensuring their villages and livelihood remained safe.

The group members have four main tasks – to patrol the forest fringes, check on water levels, rally support from their fellow villagers and to educate both the older and younger generations about preservation and restoration of the forest.

They have found an alternative income in the programmes initiated by GEC and the Selangor State Forestry Department, an opportunity they are all thankful for.



Peat fires often start at the edge of the peat swamp forests because of human negligence including land clearing, encroachment and cigarette butt thrown in the oil palm plantation. — Photos: AZLINA AHMAD and FAIHAN GHANI/The Star

Patrolling

GEC Forest and Coastal Programme coordinator Nagarajan Rengasamy said the forest's perimeter was about 300km, making it difficult for forest rangers to monitor it 24 hours a day, hence their decision to establish a social fencing using residents.

Calling themselves nature lovers, residents Shuhaimi Abdul Halim, 31, Rashid Al Kabar, 37, and Hakim Mohd Mustaqim, 23, ride their motorcycles along the boundary and walk in the forest twice a day looking for signs of encroachment and fire.

"We love our job, I have a farm and always been a farmer but taking care of the forest is a great way to ensure everyone in my village is safe," said Shuhaimi.

Rashid, who left his job at a private company, said his new responsibility was almost second nature since they all grew up in the surrounding area.

He said they already knew some of the factors of living amidst the peat swamps but the training from the relevant departments had helped them even more.

Their main job while on patrol was to look out for fires in the evening while in the morning, they needed to look for signs of encroachment.

Each day, they also change the Fire Danger Rating System Board that is based on the FDRS Observation and Forecast (from www.met.gov.my).

Hakim said they would wait for information from the GEC programme officer Saiful Anuar Zulkarnain or Nagarajan before turning the dial.

"The minute it reaches yellow or red, which is the critical period, we are on alert and set off reminding the villagers and adjacent landowners to be careful about using fire," he elaborated.

The villagers were responsive to the friendly caution that would otherwise be ignored if it came from the authorities.



Residents Shuhaimi and Hakim measuring the water levels at the Raja Musa Peat Swamp Forest Reserve during their rounds.

Alternative income

Patrolling and watching over the village can be a time-consuming task and the agencies are well aware of it, prompting GEC to find means to generate an income for their work.

Each day the group of patrollers are paid RM48 for food, time and petrol for the motorcycles they use on their rounds.

"The money is just to compensate for their time, they drive some 25km to 35km a day, helping us ensure all is well," said Faizal.

The money comes from donors including HSBC Bank Malaysia and Sime Darby Foundation.

Apart from that, they have also urged the residents to set up their own nursery to

grow trees for the rehabilitation programme.

The trees are an integral part of rehabilitating the peat forests that have been affected by fires. For example, the huge fire in 2014 took up to three months to put out and which wiped out 1,500ha of forest reserve in north Selangor.



Sariat said they have also urged the residents to set up their own nursery to grow trees for the rehabilitation programme. They have four nurseries so far.

"2014 was a bad year, there was no rain so it was very dry and some land outside the boundary was cleared, but wind blew the fire onto the reserve fringe and later to the centre of the forest," said Faizal.

Thanks to the rehabilitation programme, the land is now thriving once again, with smaller forest trees slowly growing and bringing greenery back to the site.

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