



ENVIRONMENT



Peat swamps in Malaysia are actually lush forests rich with fish, prawns and trees. When they are drained and dried, the thick peat catches fire and produces haze. Photos: GEC

Selangor's peat wetlands rich with aquatic life

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More than 60 local community members around the Klang Valley, particularly anglers and villagers, showed up at a fishing contest at Tanjung Karang, Selangor recently to demonstrate how important peat swamps are.

These swamps are one of the most unique ecosystems in the tropics. They are made from huge amounts of plant materials (which have not decomposed) to form layers of peat. The waters of a peat swamp are like a very strong, dark tea. The dark brown colourations of the waters come from organic acids or tannins from the peat. That's why they are called "blackwater rivers".

Although the waters are mildly acidic and low in oxygen, they support over 100 species of fish, including six which are found nowhere else in the world. Many species of fish that live in peat water are important for the aquarium fish trade, including the famous and colourful "fighting fish". These and other fish may be described as "blackwater treasures".

The North Selangor Peat Swamp Forest (NSPSF) inland from Tanjung Karang is one of the most important peat swamps in Peninsular Malaysia. The canal that borders the Sungai Karang Forest Reserve and Raja Musa Forest Reserve in northern Selangor is rich in many species of fish and prawns that live in its brownish waters. The trees found here include kempas, kedondong, kelat and durian.

Among the sought after species are eels (these can be cooked with dried chillies to create a local version of Japanese *unagi*) and *ikan tapah* (also known in Cantonese as *leem yu*) which can be considered as our version of cod fish.



One of the anglers trying their luck on the canals next to the peat forest.

The fishing competition aimed to encourage the conservation of the NSPSF, which covers over 73,000 hectares. It was held at the Sungai Sireh Agrotourism Homestay Centre, Tanjung Karang and was organised by [Global Environment Centre \(GEC\)](#), a non-profit organisation registered in Malaysia. Participants were limited to three rods.

Winners were judged by the weight of their catch. In case of a tie, time was taken into consideration, with the prize awarded for the earlier reported catch. The first, second and third prizes were RM1000, RM700 and RM500 respectively. The first prize winner caught a *tilan* while the other two netted *lampam*.

The event was held with the Friends of North Selangor Peat Swamp Forest or Sahabat Hutan Gambut Selangor Utara (SHGSU) which consists of members of the local communities and the general public who want to conserve the peatland forests. It aims to collaborate efforts amongst the government, the private sector, NGOs and local communities.

[The Selangor State Forestry Department](#) also supported the event. The competition was a way to foster closer relationships among SHGSU members, villagers, the Forestry Department and local authorities to ensure the NSPSF is managed in a balanced and sustainable manner.



Fish fry being released into the peat swamps by Dr Mohd Puat Dahalan, Director of Selangor State Forestry Department. Many aquarium species like the famous fighting fish come from peat swamps.

Global Environmental Centre director, Faizal Parish stated, "Fish and prawns found in peat waters are important sources of food for local communities." However, the degradation of peatlands from development and illegal encroachment in the past has created problems. Parts of the forest have been heavily drained and degraded and the thick peat has caught fire frequently during dry seasons – the resulting underground fires are very hard to put out and the smoke leads to prolonged haze.

Meanwhile, Dr Mohd Puad Dahalan, director of the Selangor State Forestry Department said, "A recent survey has shown that the North Selangor Peat Swamp Forest has a great variety of fish.

"This peat water fishing competition was organised to awaken the local community that we all share the responsibility to preserve our peat swamp forests in Selangor."

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