

Fortunes of our wetlands ebb and flow like the tide

■ **By Evangeline Majawat**
news@nst.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: In the aftermath of the Asian tsunami in 2004, wetlands were thrust into the nations' consciousness when people realised how wetlands cushioned the full force of the waves, saving many lives.

Overnight, mangrove replanting and wetland rehabilitation projects received a boost in funding and manpower.

Sadly, five years on, enthusiasm has ebbed, leaving environmentalists frustrated.

Wetlands International Malaysia communications officer Gabriel Chong said wetlands' contribution to the ecology remain "undervalued".

This is evident from how



FACTS ON WORLD WETLANDS DAY

- World Wetlands Day today marks the date the Convention on Wetlands was signed in Ramsar, Iran in 1971
- Also known as the Ramsar Convention, it is an intergovernmental treaty on the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands
- There are currently 158 contracting parties with 1,831 wetland sites, totalling 170 million hectares, designated for inclusion in the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance
- Malaysia ratified the convention in 1994
- There are six Ramsar sites in Malaysia

wetlands are threatened by continuous encroachment.

"Short-term economic gains such as logging, aquaculture and agriculture are valued over the long-term implications of destroying wetlands.

"With climate change upon us, the value of these ecosystems is more important and has to be recognised."

He suggested that the potential losses incurred from the degradation of these ecosys-

tems be calculated in ringgit and sen so that people better understand the problem.

Malaysian Nature Society executive director Dr Loh Chi Leong said the government must coordinate its efforts.

"The government's effort to replant mangroves are appreciated: however, while some areas are rehabilitated, other areas are threatened. Over the years, a lot of mangrove forest reserves have been degazetted for development."

He said awareness of the value of wetlands might have increased but many still think peat swamps have no value.

"Swamps are some of the cheapest land, which is why they are almost always the first to be developed."

He said the message for World Wetlands Day is simple: "Wetlands are crucial for our existence but we have not been taking good care of it.

"From the mangroves and swamps at the coast and upstream in catchment areas, we must take care of them."

WHAT ARE WETLANDS?

Wetlands are areas where water is the primary factor controlling the environment and the associated flora and fauna.

These areas can be natural or artificial, permanent or temporary with water that is either static, flowing, fresh, brackish or salt.

There are five major types of wetlands:

MARINE

Coastal wetlands including coastal lagoons, rocky shores and coral reefs

ESTUARINE

Including deltas, tidal marshes and mangrove swamps

LACUSTRINE

Wetlands associated with lakes

RIVERINE

Wetlands along rivers and streams

PALUSTRINE

Marshes, swamps and bogs

The Ramsar Convention also recognises man-made wetlands such as ponds, irrigated agriculture lands, reservoirs, sewage farms and canals

Wetlands exist everywhere, from tundra to the tropics

Source: www.ramsar.org



Tasik Bera, Pahang (34,446ha, listed on Nov 10, 1994)

- The country's first Ramsar site.
- This alluvial peat swamp is home to almost 100 species of freshwater fish, 200 species of birds and 68 species of mammals.
- Home to the indigenous Semelai tribe which runs a community-based programme, arranging tourist homestay, eco-adventure and cultural programmes.

Sungai Pulai, Johor (9,126ha, listed on Jan 31, 2003)

- The largest riverine mangrove system in Johor.
- Important for socio-economic activities.

Kuching Wetlands National Park, Sarawak (6,610ha, listed on Nov 8, 2005)

- Important fishing spot with 43 species of fish and 11 species of prawn, many of which are of commercially valuable.

Pulau Kukup, Johor (647ha, listed on Jan 31, 2003)

- Mangrove island recognised as one of the top birding spots in the country.
- The mudflats are rich with shellfish and provide food and income to local people.

Tanjung Piai, Johor (526ha, listed on Jan 31, 2003)

- Coastal mangroves and intertidal mudflats
- Important for protection from sea-water intrusion and coastal erosion.
- Also crucial for economic activities as the area is abundant with commercially-rich species.
- Currently under severe threat of erosion.

Lower Kinabatangan-Segama Wetland, Sabah (78,803ha, listed on Oct 28, 2008)

- The newest Ramsar site is home to threatened species such as the Proboscis Monkey, Sumatran rhinoceros and the endemic Borneo Pygmy Elephants.
- Malaysia's largest Ramsar site.

