



DIMINISHING MANGROVES

SAVE THEM BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

Only quarter of mangrove forests left compared with area in 1960s, says Penang Inshore Fisherman Welfare Association

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PENANG risks losing its mangrove forests within 10 years if unmitigated development continues to encroach on the areas.

Penang Inshore Fisherman Welfare Association (PIFWA) has estimated that there is only a quarter of mangrove forests left compared to the area in the 1960s.

certed efforts to protect our mangroves. Instead, the areas are being cleared such as in Bagan Jermal.

“If this continues, we may lose all our mangrove forests within a decade and our future generations will never get to appreciate them,” he told the *New Straits Times*.

The NST has recently reported that the remaining mangroves along the northern coast of Penang island were under



PIFWA president Ilias Shafie said the remaining mangrove forests were fast making way for development.

Ilias said the only areas in Penang with dense mangroves were in Balik Pulau, Seberang Prai Selatan and from Juru to the Perak border.

"Right now, we do not see con-

threat by development.

PIFWA has been at the forefront in the conservation of the coastal environment and replanting of mangroves,

Fishermen from Bagan Jermal here had complained that mangrove areas covering nearly 10ha, or more than 10 football fields,

were being cleared for a reclamation project.

Ilias said even the mangrove saplings planted by PIFWA since 1997 had been cleared for numerous purposes, leaving only about 250,000 from 300,000 planted.

He said when the tsunami hit parts of Asia, including Penang in December 2004, the mangrove forests had helped buffer its destructive impact and this spurred various quarters to have programmes to plant them.

"Various agencies sprouted overnight to plant mangrove saplings. However, that was mere *hangat-hangat tahi ayam* (spur of the moment).

"We hardly see anyone planting the mangrove saplings anymore... possibly, PIFWA is the only one doing so," he said.

Ilias said when PIFWA first planted the mangrove saplings, it was for fisheries purposes as the mangrove swamps served as nurseries and breeding grounds for many fish species.

He said over the years, the mangroves had been cleared for establishing new villages, such as Tanjung Tokong, and setting up of industries in Batu Kawan.

Large swathes of mangroves have also been turned into prawn farming, agriculture and aquacul-

ture activities.

Ilias pointed out that in the case of the 214.66ha Byram Mangrove Forest Reserve in Mukim 11, Seberang Prai Tengah, where century-old mangroves were once abundant, many had been destroyed due to leachate spillage, believed to be from a retention pond at the nearby Pulau Burung sanitary landfill.

The other mangrove forest reserve in the state is the 166.38ha Balik Pulau Forest Reserve.

"If the situation is left unchecked, the forest reserve will be adversely affected, and the mangroves will die."

Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Biological Sciences senior lecturer, Professor Siti Azizah Mohd Nor, said the loss of mangrove areas in some states in the peninsula had been estimated at 1.282ha, or one per cent annually, since 1990.

She said mangrove areas nationwide accounted for 0.58 million hectares, which were predominantly in Sabah and Sarawak, in 2008.

The Forestry Department has estimated that Malaysia lost almost 30 per cent of mangrove areas between 1975 and 2000 but there is no data on the size of the mangrove forests in Penang.

Siti Azizah's colleague Dr

Foong Swee Yeok, also a senior lecturer at USM's School of Biological Sciences, said she had been involved in studying mangrove ecology since 1992.

Foong said mankind was behind the destruction of the mangrove ecosystem.

"The pressure on mangrove is growing as the human population along the coast increases."

She said the status of mangroves as forest reserve had not spared them from being cleared despite rising awareness of their value.

"Most of the losses in the past 30 years were due to conversion of mangrove forest reserves into farm land, shrimp ponds, urban development and port construction," she said.

Foong cautioned that if the mangrove forests were wiped out, the state would lose all the ben-



Noor Suhaiza Zainal



Penang Inshore Fisherman Welfare Association president Ilias Shafie checking a mangrove tree at Pusat Pendidikan Kecil Hutan Paya Bakau, Sungai Acheh in Nibong Tebal on Saturday.



SAM: We depend on them for food and to protect our coastline

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GEORGE TOWN: All states, including Penang, should play a role in ensuring that the remaining mangrove forests are protected, a leading environmental group said.

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) said no development should be allowed in mangrove areas as they were important for protection of the coastal areas and as breeding ground for marine life.

"In Penang's case, it is our hope that the state government gazette all the mangrove forests in the state as permanent reserved forest for protection purposes and not as productive forest.

"We will be damned when the mangroves are gone as we depend on them for our source of food and to protect our lives," SAM president S.M. Mohamed Idris told the *New Straits Times*.

Idris said non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, communities and government agencies had embarked on rehabilitating degraded mangroves by planting saplings.

He said there were other government agencies which approved plans to convert the mangroves for other purposes.

"For example, this happened in Bagan Jermal for coastal reclamation and Balik Pulau for aquaculture.

"On one hand, there are measures to conserve mangrove forests, but on the other hand, mangroves are being cleared for development," he said.

Idris said ignorance on the importance of mangroves and human greed were some of the causes of mangrove destruction.

"Some politicians do not care about the fisheries sector or the function of mangrove role as the first defence of the coastline... what matters is profit to be gained from the area," he said.

Idris said it was upsetting that the mangrove forests in the state continued to be cleared although there had been many protests, especially by the fishing community whose livelihood was threat-

ened by development projects.

"Recently, 9.38ha of mangrove area in Bagan Jermal has been reportedly destroyed to make way for a reclamation project.

"This shows that the state government is not serious in protecting the environment and lives of the people, particularly the fishing community," he said.

Idris said past surveys revealed that hundreds of hectares of mangroves had been destroyed for the purpose of development and aquaculture projects, which threatened the source of in-

come of thousands of fishermen in the state.

"We hope that the project developer will take immediate action to replant the mangrove trees that have been felled to enable rejuvenation of the area for the sake of fishermen, future generation and the environment.



We will be damned when the mangroves are gone.

S.M. MOHAMED IDRIS
Sahabat Alam Malaysia
president

Mangroves in Byram Mangrove Forest Reserve have been affected by leachate spillage from the nearby Pulau Burung sanitary landfill in Nibong Tebal.

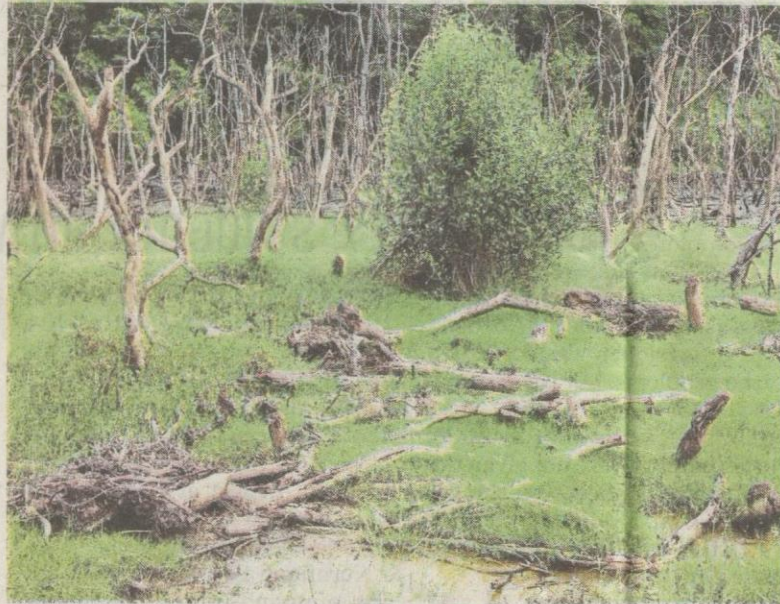
efits from the ecosystem, such as for fisheries, coastal protection and sediment accretion, carbon sequestration, siltation reduction in rivers, bioremediation of waste and nature-based tourism.

She said the massive root systems of a mangrove tree offered protection from tsunami wave flow pressure, especially on moderate tsunami impacted zones such as Penang.

“Mangroves have significant value in the coastal zone due to the benefits they provide to the communities. Mangroves and its adjoining mudflats are ideal habitats and breeding grounds for resident and migratory wildlife.”

For example, she said these habitats were often the wintering and/or staging ground for at least 30 species of migratory waterbirds, which usually foraged at exposed mudflat during low tide and moved to mangrove forest or marshes at high tide.

Foong said many of the mangroves were potential nature-based tourism sites and a good ex-



Dying mangrove trees in Byram Mangrove Forest Reserve in Seberang Prai Tengah, where century-old mangroves were once abundant. PIX BY DANIAL SAAD

ample was the firefly tourism along Sungai Kerian in Nibong Tebal.

“Unique and rare fauna in the mangroves further add to its attraction,” she said.

For Noor Suhaiza Zainal, 24, who pursued her studies in natural resources sciences at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, it would be a waste if future generations were not exposed to the

importance of mangrove forests.

“Most people usually associate mangrove forests with being dirty but it can be fun once you learn more about it,” she said.

Noor Suhaiza is helping Ilias at the Pusat Pendidikan Kecil Hutan Paya Laut in Sungai Acheh, Nibong Tebal, which he plans to turn it into an educational forest reserve.

‘Penang to gazette mangrove areas as forest reserves’

GEORGE TOWN: The state government plans to gazette mangrove areas in Penang as forest reserves to ensure they are properly protected.

State Environment Committee chairman Phee Boon Poh said it planned to gazette areas with dense mangrove forests from Bagan Belat to Kuala Muda in Seberang Prai Utara and Sungai Acheh in Seberang Prai Selatan.

He said there was no statistics on the size of mangrove forests in the state as the Forestry Department was in the process of surveying the areas.

“Once the survey is ready, we hope to identify the mangrove areas in the state.

“We plan to gazette most of

them to ensure their continuous existence,” he told the *New Straits Times*.

Phee said there were more mangroves in the state now compared with before the tsunami in December 2004, but he could not provide relevant information.

In October 2011, Phee reportedly announced that the state government had plans to declare 664ha of mangrove forests in the state as permanent forest reserve.

He had said the state government’s target was to declare at least 800ha as forest reserve to protect the mangroves.

However, there has not been any new development since his announcement.



Phee Boon Poh