

2 RIVERS IN LOJING UNDER THREAT

Orang Asli claim upstream farms are filling waterways with mud and chemicals

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SOME 3,000 Orang Asli living near Lojing Highlands here are concerned about unchecked agricultural activities upstream, which are polluting two rivers that used to support their livelihood.

If the situation persists, they fear landslides and floods will occur, especially during the rainy season.

They claimed that pollution had significantly affected Sungai Belatok and Sungai Brooke.

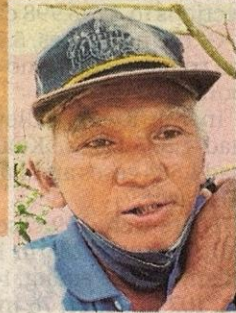
They said Sungai Rengil here could face a similar fate.

Sungai Brooke *tok batin* (village head) Rial Ujang, 47, said the pollution of the rivers had been going on for more than 10 years.

“Agricultural activities in Lojing Highlands began in 2015 and the situation has worsened ever since.

“The farmers have begun expanding their plots. This has led to the two rivers being filled with mud,” he said in an interview with the *New Sunday Times*.

Rial, who became the village head in 2011, said people were worried about their safety as



Sungai Belatok in Lojing, Kelantan, has become murky with mud said to have come from farms upstream. (Inset, left) Sungai Brooke village head Rial Ujang and (inset, right) Kampung Pos Brooke resident, Kamarudin Uda. PIX BY SHARIFAH MAHSINAH ABDULLAH

rains could trigger landslides.

He claimed that the community had expressed concerns to state government officials a number of times, but no action had been taken.

“People are tired of waiting.

“We have complained many times, but nobody seems to be listening. Do they want a tragedy to happen before taking any action?”

Villager Kamarudin Uda, 53,

from Kampung Pos Brooke, said people from five Orang Asli villages in the area used to depend on the three rivers for food and water.

“However, the pollution has become so bad that the people had to look for other sources of livelihood.

“Before this, we took water from the rivers for daily use. But now, the water is so dirty.

“It is muddy and has foreign

chemicals, which we believe are from fertilisers and pesticides used in farming.”

The father of three said his family exercised caution whenever they took water from the river for daily use.

“For the last 10 years, it has been difficult to even catch fish from the rivers, which have also become very shallow because of sludge.”

There are four Orang Asli set-

tlements in Lojing Highlands, and they are in Pos Brooke, Sigar, Sangwai and Sendrop.

Page 1 Pics: (Top) Vegetable greenhouses built in rows on a hill which has been cleared for farming at Lojing Highlands.

(Bottom) Members of the media take photographs inside an office room at the President's Palace in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on Friday.

'Majority of farmers have violated EIA rules'

GUA MUSANG: Massive land clearing for farming in Lojing Highlands near here appears to be going on unabated.

Sources who spoke to the *New Sunday Times* on Friday said farmers were still carrying out the activity to plant more vegetable varieties, such as tomatoes and long beans.

"These farms have existed since 1990, but they grow in size every year.

"The number of farmers in Lojing Highlands has also grown exponentially over the years. Many do not adhere to good farming practices, such as proper waste disposal, and this could lead to environmental issues. I am sure there have been violations of the Environmental Impact Assess-

ment (EIA)," one of the sources said.

"Their failure to adhere to EIA guidelines could weaken the soil and lead to erosion, as well as other environmental issues that affect the rivers nearby," said another source.

The sources also said it was difficult to establish if the farmers or land operators had obtained a permit for land expansion.

"Local authorities conduct regular checks to make sure that the rules are followed. They have also taken action against operators who breach the rules. However, many operators don't seem to care and continue to violate the rules. They are not scared, maybe because the penalties are not severe enough."

Checks by the *New Sunday Times* found that the number of vegetable farms in Lojing Highlands had doubled in just three years, from more than 200 in 2019 to around 400 this year.

Most of them are located on hillsides, and some have even encroached on the main road.

Lojing Highlands district officer Zamri Ibrahim said there had been times when action was taken against farmers for violating EIA regulations, but he did not divulge the details.

"A majority of farmers in Lojing Highlands have been breaching the EIA rules. However, I cannot provide the details (of the violations) and the number of farmers involved," he said in a short reply on WhatsApp.



A vegetable greenhouse at Lojing Highlands.