

Protecting

Malaysia's spine

Money talks, they say.
So can the Federal
Government use innovative
financial mechanisms
to encourage state
governments to conserve
the forest that makes up
the country's crucial
Central Forest Spine? 2-3

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A masterplan to *rule* them all?



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WHEN reports filtered in late last month that a tiger might be stalking livestock in Felda Ulu Tebrau, a chill went up many spines.

Felda Ulu Tebrau, a sleepy village flanking a single-lane road, is very close to major residential areas in Johor Baru, the country's second largest metropolitan area after the Klang Valley. In fact, Ulu Tebrau is so close that, administratively, it lies within the district of Johor Baru, and is only about 8km from the suburb of Ulu Tiram.

Thankfully, though, after the initial scare caused by the three headless cow carcasses and tiger tracks found by farmers, the animal seems to have headed back into the nearby jungle.

Conservationists have since surmised that the tiger might have been driven out of the Pantii forest in Kota Tinggi, the nearest wild area to Felda Ulu Tebrau, in search of prey after African swine flu decimated the local boar population.

The 12,140ha Pantii forest harbours over 500 species of animals, plants and insects, so there has been a suggestion that it be turned into a wildlife reserve – however, a major road, Jalan Kuang-Jemaluang, intersects the forest in the west.

Most importantly, it is some distance away from the much larger Endau-Rompin-Sedili jungle complex that lies within the Central Forest Spine, and which would have offered any hungry tiger richer prey than livestock.

It's a situation that the Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change Ministry is hoping to correct.

Addressing the Dewan Rakyat on March 9, Minister Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad said the government is in the midst of implementing an initiative to conserve and protect the Central Forest Spine. The Central Forest Spine

Ecological Network Master Plan, to be put into place in several phases from 2022 until 2040, aims to link, maintain, preserve, and conserve divided jungle areas along the backbone of Peninsular Malaysia.

Among others, the implementation, the minister was quoted as saying, will see three proposed ecological network plans in Johor, two of which are from the Pantii forest to Ulu Sendili, and from Pantii to Seluyut Forest Reserve.

Malaysia's green lungs

Comprising eight forest complexes, the Central Forest Spine (CFS) measures 6.71 million hectares and spans eight states and 58 districts.

Made up of permanent forest reserves, government land forests, national parks, state parks, wildlife reserves, and agricultural areas, the CFS plays a starring role in helping to regulate tem-

peratures and conserve wildlife biodiversity; it is also a major catchment area for water and oxygen.

The CFS also acts as a "highway" for large mammals like the endangered Malayan tiger and the Asian elephant to travel from one forest to another in search of food and mates.

If anything, the rise in the number of human-wildlife conflict cases – such as the tiger incident in Felda Ulu Tebrau – is an indication of how fragmented and degraded parts of the CFS have become.

The masterplan aims to fix this but critics question if it will work given that, under the Federal Constitution, state governments have jurisdiction over land and forestry. What's more, this is not the first masterplan – a similar initiative was mentioned as far back as 2005 and nothing seems to have come of that or later ones.

Such a masterplan, says

Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) president Meenakshi Raman, can only be followed-through if its implementation receives full cooperation from other agencies, such as the Forestry Department, the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan), and, in particular, state governments.

"At the end of the day, states have the full jurisdiction over forest and land matters," she stresses.

Eight states – Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Selangor, and Terengganu – are involved in the masterplan.

Meenakshi cites parts in the current masterplan which reported that only 42% of the strategies identified in the 2010 CFS plan have been implemented.

This was due to, among others, weak promotion, limited financial resources for the preparation of state level action plans, and the lack of translation of



This is the large paw print of the tiger that attacked livestock at Ulu Tebrau. The last time a big cat was spotted in the area was before the village was settled in the 1960s.



The headless carcass of a cow found in Felda Ulu Tebrau recently, believed to have been attacked by a tiger, according to Perhilitan. – Photos: MOHD FARHAAN SHAH/ The Star



Allowing new destructive activities within the CFS zone undermines the existence of the masterplan, says Dzaeman.



Meenakshi stresses that the masterplan to manage the Central Forest Spine must have buy-in from the states involved as "At the end of the day, states have full jurisdiction over forest and land matters".



Gua Musang OCPD Deputy Supt Azmi Mokhtar visiting an Orang Asli Bateq family last week that lost a family member to a tiger attack. – Bernama

When their habitats are fragmented and encroached on, tigers sometimes come into conflict with humans as they search for prey, as happened in a Felda village recently.
— Photos: Filepics/The Star



Asian elephants spotted along Kedah's Sungai Muda. There are increasing numbers of reports of these large animals seen on the fringes of human settlements, and sometimes within settlements even.

details at the planning level into Structure Plans, Local Plans and Special Area Plans.

"(This) is seriously worrying. Such constraints must be overcome urgently if the vision of the new CFS Masterplan is to be realised.

"This requires cooperation among all the relevant agencies at the federal, state, and local levels. Otherwise, the vision will be poorly implemented," site says.

Digging for trouble

Another bone environmentalists have to pick with the masterplan is that forest plantations, sand quarrying and mining – activities generally thought to be harmful to nature – will continue to be allowed within the CFS.

In Malaysia, forest plantations usually consist of monocultures like acacia or rubberwood, and the trees are usually harvested for timber; scientists have long argued against monocultures due to the lack of biodiversity,

while the value of environmental services from natural forests is much higher.

Meenakshi says although the masterplan does have a policy direction to discourage or prohibit destructive activities within the CFS generally and the Ecological Networks specifically, the fact remains that if they are permitted, then the forest complexes and their wildlife will be affected.

"We need to stop the use of the term 'forest plantation'. This term, also in use internationally, is scientifically wrong.

"The CFS is supposed to connect various forest complexes in Peninsular Malaysia. But a plantation is not a forest. A fragmented network is not a network. A broken spine can no longer function as a spine," she says.

While the permission for such activities has been a consistent position of national policies, such as those on forestry, timber, and mining, Meenakshi says as a special planning document for a special network of forests, the masterplan could have done bet-

ter with those contradictory policies.

"The recommendation to ensure that monoculture plantations are only developed on 'kawasan terosot', or degraded areas, and 'hutan miskin', or poor forests affected by illegal logging or encroachment ... is still concerning to us as these provide excuses for undermining the integrity of the forest complexes and ecosystem," she says.

Meenakshi also points to reports on how a large amount of timber could still be harvested during the clear felling of degraded forests for the purpose of monoculture plantations.

"Such a stance could also be abused by unscrupulous parties to pave the way for forest degradation so that they could profit from its conversion.

"But then, even if a forest is severely degraded, rehabilitation is still possible," she says, adding that resources and expertise can be roped in from organisations like the Forest Research Institute Malaysia and others.

Ecologist and Tropical Rainforest Conservation and Research Centre executive director Dr Dzaeman Dzulkifli says the only circumstance under which these activities should be happening within biodiversity hotspots is if they have been in operation before the creation of the masterplan.

"Allowing new destructive activities within the CFS zone undermines the existence of the masterplan," he says.

Can money talk loud enough?

As a measure to persuade state governments to stop logging or mining within forests, the Federal Government introduced a financial mechanism called the Ecological Fiscal Transfer (EFT).

EFT works by paying state governments the costs of conserving or expanding a tract of protected forest, which, if converted into logging or used for other commercial purposes, would have earned the state revenue.

Introduced at RM60mil in Budget 2019, this sum was upped almost three-fold to RM150mil in Budget 2023.

Overall, the Federal Government has set aside over

RM390mil in the four years since the scheme first came about.

Since last year, the Finance Ministry has allocated grants under the EFT to the Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change Ministry to execute and implement.

Under guidelines outlined by the ministry, the distribution of grants among the states works like this: 70% is based on the size of the area, and 30% on "performance".

The ministry has mentioned previously that the EFT is expected to benefit states like Kedah, Kelantan, Pahang, Perak, Sabah, Sarawak, and Terengganu.

What's the true value?

However, many environmentalists ask if this will be enough for the forests to be left alone?

A budget of RM150mil under the EFT is inadequate to compensate all states for conserving forest within the CFS linkages, says Dzaeman.

"State buy-in is critical for the masterplan to work as all land matters are governed by the state.

"By setting aside land for protection, states lose out on opportunities to generate revenue, as state revenues are generated from primary industries such as mining and timber production," he says.

For example, according to the Malaysian Timber Industry Board, as of November 2022, the country's timber exports were valued at some RM22.25bil, an increase from RM22.75bil in 2021 despite a drop in demand from Europe.

Also, Kedah Menteri Besar Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor had reportedly said in 2021 that the state should get RM100mil a year for keeping its forests intact, while in 2019, Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Wan Rosdy Wan Ismail estimated the state's total opportunity costs to be RM17.1bil from logging and minerals as well as land premiums and taxes.

In addition to states having to be compensated via the EFTs, Dzaeman says other ecosystem-based compensation could also be developed to "appropriately value" these forests that require protection.

"Forests are currently valued

for natural resource extraction rather than the ecosystem services they provide, which are often not taken into consideration when these lands are being utilised.

"Alternate financing for ecosystem services such as watershed protection, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity protection has been gaining momentum globally in the last few years, which indicates promising avenues to explore for states to maintain forest coverage while still being able to generate revenue," Dzaeman says.

Besides EFTs, there are other financial instruments that can be used, currently parked under the Malaysia Forest Fund, such as the Forest Conservation Certificate and Forest Carbon Offsets.

Approved by the Cabinet in 2020 and incorporated in June 2021 under the Companies Act, the Malaysia Forest Fund is now under the purview of the Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change Ministry.

Interestingly, a 2020 study by Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) estimated the total economic value of forest ecosystem services of Johor's 48,905ha Endau Rompin National Park alone to be worth RM13bil.

The study, titled "The Total Economic Value of Forest Ecosystem Services in the Tropical Forests of Malaysia", based its estimation on the value of timber and recreation, benefits from watershed services, and carbon sequestration.

UPM's Forestry and Environment Faculty senior lecturer Nitanan Koshy was part of the team that conducted the study, and he says forests need to be valued and conserved for their potential ecosystem services rather than for alternative development purposes.

Can financial mechanisms like EFT help persuade state governments to forego mining or logging their forests?

"Logically, I would say reduce," he replies.

With the extremely high probability of a strong El Nino season coming our way, along with fears of drought, heatwaves, and water supply problems, we need our trees more than ever.

As one famous advertisement used to say, "There are some things money can't buy".

This is why we need the Central Forest Spine

■ The Central Forest Spine houses some of the world's oldest forests, including the 434,300ha Taman Negara that extends across Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan with virgin jungle estimated at over 130 million years old.

■ It is home to protected animal species such as the Asian elephant, Malayan tapir, the Malayan sun bear, and the highly endangered Malayan tiger, as well as unique plant species like the largest flowers in the world, the gigantic rafflesias.

■ A total of 80% of the Central Forest Spine comprises critical water catchment areas that are the source of many major rivers, supplying water to 22.3 million people in Peninsular Malaysia.

■ The Central Forest Spine also offers natural forest products like rattan, bamboo, petai, wild honey and agarwood that can be sustainably harvested.

■ Besides Taman Negara, other parks located within the Central Forest Spine are the 27,891ha Royal Belum State Park in Perak, and the 48,905ha Endau-Rompin National Park in Johor. With global tourism rising after the Covid-19 pandemic, these parks are great for ecotourism. In 2019, a survey found that 30.4% of tourists who came to Malaysia took part in walking or hiking and trekking-related activities.

■ The Central Forest Spine helps to mitigate rising temperatures from climate change. Natural forests in Peninsular Malaysia are estimated to store some 1.139 trillion tonnes of carbon stock, of which 85% are in the Central Forest Spine.

The Star graphics

