

From wasteland to wonderland

Villagers transform illegal dumpsite in Teluk Panglima Garang into eco-tourism attraction

AWAY from the skyscrapers and bustling city, is a serene spot in Teluk Panglima Garang, Selangor, which leaves visitors feeling rejuvenated.

Sprawling across 24ha, the Sijangkang Mangrove Recreational Park is located southwest of Selangor.

It is situated at the fringes of Kampung Sijangkang and about 18km from Klang or 25km from Banting, Kuala Langat.

Once a site that was notorious for illegal dumping, the area has undergone a remarkable transformation.

Today, it flourishes as a mangrove forest teeming with diverse life forms.

Thanks to endeavours of Sijangkang villagers, with support from the authorities, companies and institutions of higher learning, the mangrove forest has been restored to its natural state.

The Sijangkang ecopark has 15 types of mangrove species.

Some of the mangrove trees here could even be more than 100 years old.

Located next to Sungai Langat, the mangrove forest is popular among nature lovers.

The peaceful sound of the flowing river creates an atmosphere of calm and tranquillity.

Birds flying across the skies are an enchanting sight to behold from the forest.

Outdoor enthusiasts and bird watchers have been drawn to the Sijangkang Mangrove Recreational Park since it opened at the end of 2015.

A 1.8km boardwalk allows visitors of all ages to navigate through the mangrove forest while taking in its sights, sounds and scents.

"It is the favourite haunt of Sijangkang residents and jungle trekkers.

"Couples who love being outdoors also come here to take photos while being surrounded by nature," Sijangkang community head Mohd Suhaimi Sanusi told *Bernama*.

The Kampung Sijangkang Community was set up at the initiative of a group of 15 people, led by Mohd Suhaimi, to maintain cleanliness of the village and mangrove forest.

Turning landfill into wetland

Mohd Suhaimi said when it was a landfill, the site amassed tonnes of residential waste over the years.

He said the situation worsened in early 2015 as manufacturing waste started appearing at the landfill.

Mohd Suhaimi recalled seeing several dumpsites with a 15.5m pile of rubbish along the 6km route to the mangrove forest.

"As the village has no waste disposal management system,



Mohd Suhaimi briefing Sijangkang Mangrove Recreational Park visitors.



Mohd Suhaimi with the certificates and awards the ecopark has received.

some folks buried or burned their rubbish while residents on the fringes of the village dumped rubbish here.

"The scale of the rubbish at the landfill was not initially high as villagers would burn them.

"But the situation worsened when bins began overflowing with black rubbish bags.

"A foul odour emanated from the landfill and packs of stray animals went there to forage.

"It was risky for children and senior citizens as there were loose nails scattered around the site, as well as wood and bricks from construction sites.

"There was also a high risk of being attacked by stray dogs."

At the height of the crisis, Mohd Suhaimi and other villagers called on Kuala Langat Municipal Council (MPKL) to provide a sustainable solid waste management system and alerted the council to the rampant illegal dumping from the construction sector.

Several clean-up operations were undertaken by the council but illegal dumping was rife

because of a lack of monitoring.

With no end in sight, Mohd Suhaimi, who has been living there for over 35 years, decided to mobilise the village community against the illegal dumping in their area in addition to campaigning against the illicit felling of mangrove trees.

Overcoming hurdles

"Over time, the mountains of rubbish rose at the sprawling dumpsite.

"This was further aggravated by the absence of proper waste disposal.

"Lightweight rubbish was easily dispersed by wind while some got trapped in the roots of mangrove trees or others reached Sungai Langat, giving rise to pollution that affected the people's source of livelihood.

"We mobilised our 15 volunteers to clean up the area starting in August 2015 and with cooperation from villagers and the council, we made a significant change."

However, Mohd Suhaimi said



the journey to develop Kampung Sijangkang into an ecotourism destination was no mean feat.

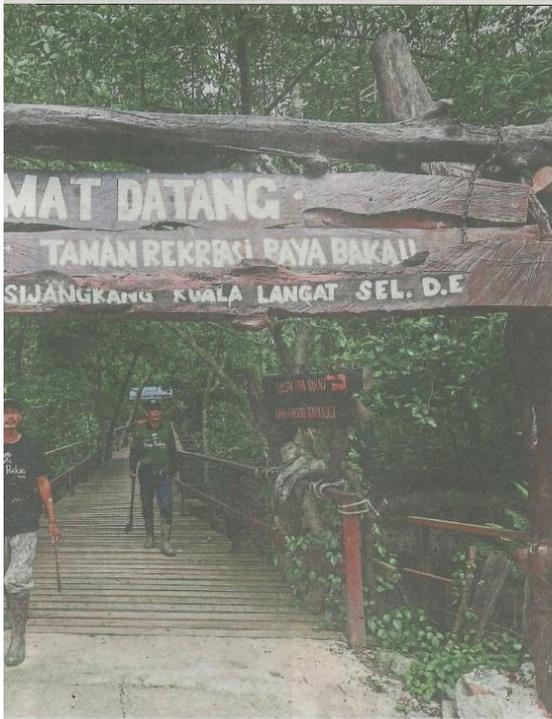
In addition to the many hurdles, he said they had to overcome scepticism from local folk and the lack of cooperation to clean up the village.

"We managed to win over sceptical residents, convincing people on the importance of preserving nature as it facilitates healthy lifestyles through recreational activities while improving their socio-economic well-being," he added.

Mohd Suhaimi said the community had not expected their efforts to have a positive effect on the local economy.

The mangrove forest of Kampung Sijangkang is fast gaining popularity among local and foreign tourists.

After it opened at the end of 2015, companies chose the recreational park for its corporate social responsibility programmes - to plant mangrove trees on the weekends - while local and foreign institutions of higher learning organised edu-



Mangrove forests, which form their own ecosystems, provide ideal breeding grounds for fish, shrimp, crabs and other shellfish.



(Above) With the support of the council, corporations and institutions, villagers have managed to beautify the mangrove forest and brand it as a public educational-recreational space. — Photos: Bernama



A 1.8km boardwalk allows visitors of all ages to navigate through the mangrove forest while taking in its sights, sounds and scents.



(From left) Community volunteers Zulbahrin Jamil, Muhammad Nazhif Kamal, Hamdan Karidi and Muhammad Darwis Zafri Sukri planting mangrove tree saplings at Sijangkang Mangrove Recreational Park.

cational activities and undertook mangrove forest studies. This development augured well for the local economy and increasingly, more locals became community volunteers. Mohd Suhaimi said the community was now collaborating with several local institutions to enhance the infrastructure and mangrove forest knowledge for educational programmes. "We have agreements with Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) – and they also have laboratories here. "We are also working with UPM and the Forestry Department to develop a barcode system to allow visitors to learn about the trees by scanning the barcodes with their smartphones," Mohd Suhaimi said. Today, the number of community volunteers stands at 40. Team members undertake cleaning and monitoring efforts to ensure no more dumping occurs. They also serve as tour guides,

in addition to creating public awareness on the importance of preserving mangrove forests. Facilities such as campsites are available and in addition to jungle trekking, other possible activities at the park include catching snails in the mangrove forest and fishing (by prior arrangement). "Many organisations have supported our ecosystem restoration efforts, including MPKL, companies and institutions, which pitched in to beautify the mangrove forest areas. "This helped to realise our aspiration of branding the park as an educational-recreation park for all. "MPKL has also been promoting the area as an educational-ecotourism park through travel agencies," said Mohd Suhaimi. **Local, international awards** The transformation from an infamous waste disposal site into an eco-friendly park has earned recognition both locally and abroad. Among its accolades are the

"Friends of River for Selangor" award from Selangor Water Management Authority (Luas) and the Green Initiative Award from MPKL – platinum winner in the outdoor public park category. It also gained international recognition from the Japan-Asean Integration Fund (JAIF) and the Institute of Global Environment Strategies (IGES). "These awards are highly appreciated as they serve as catalysts to motivate various parties to help us by allocating their resources, time or financial contributions," said Mohd Suhaimi. However, the real success, he said, had been in how the community spirit was developed with a common goal to preserve the park's natural environment with the help of civic-minded and environmentally conscious tourists. Mohd Suhaimi hoped the government would continue supporting the local community's initiatives in conserving and restoring mangrove forests, in Sijangkang and in other areas.

"Many who are new to the place often cannot believe that Sijangkang park was once an illegal waste disposal site. "Thanks to the community's commitment to sustainability, local issues were amicably and speedily resolved," he said. Mangrove ecologist Dr A. Aldrie Amir, a senior lecturer and research fellow at the Institute for Environment and Development (Lestari) of UKM, said mangrove forests, which form their own ecosystems, provide ideal breeding grounds for fish, shrimp, crabs and other shellfish. Citing the Kampung Sijangkang community, he said the villagers' exemplary efforts should be emulated, noting that government involvement in joint preservation and restoration efforts with the community as undertaken by the Forestry Department would be a step in the right direction. Aldrie, who is also Malaysian Mangrove Research Alliance & Network (MyMangrove) coordinator, said it was crucial for the community to be actively

involved in protecting and conserving the mangrove forest, given that a majority of the population relied on fishing as their economic mainstay. He said the surroundings of a mangrove forest created a productive ecosystem, allowing a healthy food chain to take place and contribute to biodiversity for both land and marine species. He also highlighted how mangroves serve to protect communities from major storms and strong waves. "Usually, mangrove forest areas are gazetted as forest reserves or protected forests while the Forestry Department undertakes monitoring. "However, the local community, who are not directly involved in its implementation, could serve as the eyes and ears of the government. "Kampung Sijangkang has come a long way, from an illegal dumpsite to what it is today. "Success would not have been possible without the collective endeavours of the local community."