

Forests and food security

THE granary of Kedah and Perlis is known as Malaysia's rice bowl, or *jelapang padi*, as it contributes 40% of our national rice production. This is our food security area. If there are any untoward incidents, such as a geopolitical crisis, that prevents us from importing rice, this rice bowl will be our primary source of rice production.

In an effort to enhance this food security, the Malaysian government has increased a financial allocation of RM3bil in 2023 to RM5bil this year to upgrade irrigation systems in the Muda Agricultural Development Area (Mada) granary area. This is with the intention of increasing rice production capacity from four to five harvests over two years, against the present capacity of four times over two years.

Improving rice production requires a steady source of water, which is why the Ahning, Pedu and Muda Dams were built in the Mada granary area. These dams collect water flowing from the Ulu Muda Forest Complex in Kedah, an important water catchment under the 4th National Physical Plan and the Northern Corridor Economic Region Plan. The Mada granary depends on a steady water supply from these dams – so, in short, the Ulu Muda Forest Complex is directly linked to the country's food security.



Precious: A 2019 drone image of Tasik Muda Lake with the dam at the bottom right of picture and Ulu Muda Forest Reserve in the background. – Filepic/The Star

Spanning 163,810ha, the Ulu Muda Forest Complex is an important water catchment that supplies water not only for our food security but also for domestic, industrial and commercial uses. However, a large proportion of Ulu Muda is also designated as production forests for logging to generate income for development in the state.

The felling of trees and transportation of logs result in exposure of soil and deep erosion,

causing sedimentation in the rivers. Logging in the upper catchments results in high rates of sedimentation and movement of forest debris into the rivers.

With logging occurring in the Ulu Muda Forest Complex, the reservoirs will in time be filled with sedimentation, shortening their lifespans. In addition, the ability of the forests to regulate water flow and provide clean water for our needs will also be affected.

If left unchecked, the ability of the dams to provide water at the right time and quantity for padi cultivation will become compromised and the production of rice for Malaysia will be severely impacted, jeopardising national food security.

Our huge investments in dam construction and irrigation improvements will also become futile.

The advent of climate change leading to extreme weather events such as prolonged droughts and excessive rainfalls that carry huge loads of sedimentation will worsen the impact caused by logging.

We can prevent this. As citizens who depend on this area for our food security, we should collectively invest in protecting the source of the water itself, which is the catchment forest in Ulu Muda, by keeping the forest in this complex intact.

Our taxpayers' money would be well invested in means to protect our food security. Investing in protecting our forests, especially the Ulu Muda Forest Complex, an important water catchment area for the Mada granary, is a critical step in this.

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