KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

KERATAN SURAT KHABAR

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A DECADE OF LOSSES

A Wildlife Act with more bite is a positive start

IT took a decade but the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010 finally got a much-needed update last year when the Dewan Negara passed the amendment bill.

It was a decade in which Malaysia experienced significant wildlife losses, witnessed huge seizures, saw the rise of online wildlife crimes and experienced a crisis so great that it brought multiple agencies together to crack down on poaching and illegal wildlife trade.

The need for a stronger law was never more urgent.

While much focus of the buzz has been on the powerhouse fines and jail terms, it is the tighter regulation of traders and wildlife-related activities that are likely to have a more immediate impact.

An attempt to tackle the illegal online wildlife trade is evident in a new clause that limits the promotion of wildlife for business purposes to licensed dealers.

Two other new clauses with hefty fines and jail terms have been introduced to dissuade people from falsifying, altering or damaging permits, licences and special permits.

This is to provide an additional assurance of legality and to stop the provision of false information to authorities.

The changes also significantly raise the risk for those caught poaching in wildlife reserves and sanctuaries.

A maximum fine of RM1 million reflects the seriousness of Malaysia's poaching crisis.

With these and other changes, the focus shifts from just species protection to recognising and addressing wildlife crime more widely.

In terms of species, there were a few changes. Chief among them was the critically endangered Sunda pangolin being included in a category with much higher fines and jail terms.

This also happened for the Binturong, Asian Golden Cat, Sun Bear, Marbled Cat, Flat-headed cat, Banded Linsang, Spotted Linsang, Sumatran and Bornean Orang Utan.

TRAFFIC welcomes the amendments but cautions that its effectiveness in curbing wildlife crime and protecting species will depend on how well the law is wielded.

We urge the Energy and Natural Resources Ministry to look into these factors:

PROPERLY provide resources to the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan), which has insufficient manpower and finances to carry out its core duties, especially in dealing with human-wildlife conflicts.

Poachers and traffickers will resort to more ingenious ways to escape a strengthened law and Perhilitan will be further stretched, juggling between investigations and prosecutions, and rising human-wildlife conflict.

The agency should not have to sacrifice one for the other. Otherwise, neither will get done satisfactorily;

SECURING convictions in court. During the debate in the Dewan Rakyat, Sepang member of parliament Mohamed Hanipa Maidin said he found the performance of Perhilitan staff in the witness stand unconvincing.

The agency's ability to mount a strong prosecution following a solid investigation lies at the heart of making this law work. Without it, big fines and long jail terms are but empty threats.

Empowering Perhilitan's prosecution division, investing in increasing legal expertise and building intelligence-led investigations should be a priority for the ministry.

CHECKING Malaysia's transit role in global trafficking. Senator Datuk A. Kesavadas called for detailed investigations to uncover the masterminds behind the smuggling of 50 rhino horn pieces last September.

This is welcome but Malaysia is also a key transit point in the trafficking of pangolin scales, ivory and rosewood, all of which demand thorough investigations.

The amendments cast a wider net on officials in corporations who can be held accountable for wildlife crimes.

MORE than meetings: TRAFFIC congratulates the National Tiger Conservation Task Force (MyTTF) on its first meeting chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Ismail Sabri Yaakob on Jan 10.

We hope this is more like the proactive, results-oriented multi-agency task force that is Op Bersepadu Khazanah.

Malaysia has a good recipe for success, and it is now time to close the remaining gaps, and address and resolve some long-standing issues.

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