KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

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DEFORESTATION

IT'S DO OR DIE FOR ORANG ASLI

Tigers making their last stand in what limited land they have, says villager

VEENA BABULAL
KUALA LUMPUR
news@nst.com.my

A MORATORIUM on logging and forest clearing should be imposed in light of tiger attacks in Kelantan and the floods that struck Peninsular Malaysia last month, said environmentalists and Orang Asli leaders.

They said the violent effects of deforestation were no longer seasonal or isolated events.

At least 54 people died in the floods, with a marked increase in human-wildlife conflict cases, especially in Gua Musang, one of the last bastions of the Orang Asli and tigers.

Kelantan Deputy Menteri Besar Datuk Mohd Amar Nik Abdullah's remark that logging was not at the root of the tiger attack that killed Anek Along, 59, in Kampung Sau, Gua Musang, on Jan 7 also rubbed salt into the wound.

They claim this was the latest in a series of denials by the state on its role in approving land for agriculture and mining projects that had degraded forests and rivers the Orang Asli depended on.

In 2019, when Bateq near Pos Kuala Koh faced a measles outbreak that killed 15 people, the state government dismissed the villagers' concerns about the possibility that their water source had been poisoned by mining and deforestation.

Deforestation had also boxed the Orang Asli into a small parcel of land that reduced their food source, they said.

This had forced the tribe to abandon the nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life.

Nasir Dollah, 32, from Pos Ber, said deforestation could not be denied as the Balah Forest Reserve, in which 100,000 ha in tree cover and buffers grew, had been logged and cleared.

Now less than 30 per cent of this tiger habitat, which stretches from Pos Gob and Pos Simpor in the north to Pos Bihai and Belatim in the south, remains.

"There was logging previously but the trees were allowed to regrow.

"But now there is logging and opening up of land for plantations and other projects, so all the green patches are fragmented. There are no secondary or small brushes for tigers to seek cover in.

"It's no surprise that tiger sightings are more common as more humans are encroaching on their space.

"Although we (Orang Asli) used to share space with them before, they had more land to retreat to.

"Now with only a small piece of land to be in, where do you expect them to go? Putrajaya?"

Anek's death, he said, was preceded by a tiger attack in Kampung Badak, Pos Bihai.

There had also been sunbear sightings and attacks in Pos Belatim, which, with Pos Bihai, is still relatively "green" due to court cases over the state's logging concessions.

Nasir said the degazettement of the Perias Permanent Forest reserve, which the Balah forest branches into, was also a blow to tigers as the area was a tiger habitat under the national inventory for the species.

A rainforest space of 100 km2 can host one to two tigers as a result of low prey densities.

To maintain viable tiger populations of at least six breeding females, reserves need to be larger than 1,000 km2.

Nasir said the worst was yet to come as the Sungai Nenggiri mega hydroelectric dam, which is slated to be completed in 2026, would shrink the forest further.

"We need a moratorium on forest and land clearing in Kelantan and halt these projects.

"The federal government can help the state through anti-logging compensation, which the prime minister announced, as well as sharing oil royalties.

"It's now do or die for us, because the tigers are making their last stand in what limited land they have.

"They will die first, but they will take down more of us while they die out."

The tiger habitats overlap with 332 key biodiversity areas in the globe.

As such, conservation of tigers preserves forest cover, rivers and other protected species, such as orang utans and Sumateran Rhinos.

If they disappeared, then forests, rivers and other animals would follow suit.

Centre for Orang Asli Concerns executive director Colin Nicholas said the moratorium should be expanded to all areas in the peninsula to protect tigers and the massive ecosystem it supported.

He said the 2014 floods had devastated Orang Asli communities.

The Orang Asli, he said, rejected the claim that the tigers had suffered canine distemper, as talk among them had revealed the possibility that the three tigers could have been kept by a private collector and had been hand reared before they were released.

"If they were fed by humans, this might explain why they are familiar with humans and coming closer."

He said killing the tigers should only be done as a last resort.

"Before the authorities do this (killing), they must show evidence that they have exhausted other options, including tranquillising the animals to relocate them.

"And they must be made to show evidence that they had done so by video traps."

Nicholas was drawing on a recording obtained by the *New Straits Times* in which a person briefing the community on the operation to kill tigers said the army and other officers had been called in to hunt and kill the animals.

The person called on the community not to take recordings during the massive exercise as firearms were expected to be used.

He said the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan) had examined stool samples and found the presence of a virus, causing the tigers to be unafraid of humans (distemper).

The person said he had told Perhilitan that he did not want to entertain appeals from it on setting up traps as the operation was now a hunting (and killing) operation.

Ecotourism and Conservation Society Malaysia head Andrew J. Sebastian said while tigers were reputedly elusive, there was still a dearth of studies on their behaviour in the wild, especially when facing starvation and lack of tree cover.

"If you take all the forests and they have nowhere to go, they end up running into you.

"That's their land. The place that is their territory is now your house, school or shop.

"And if there is no prey and they are hungry or ousted by other territorial tigers, where do you think the apex predator would turn to?

"Of course people are likely to be next on the menu," he said, drawing on views that Malayan tigers were less aggressive than their Bengal counterpart.

History has also shown that human-tiger conflicts rose in India when India became a colony and the tigers were driven out of their habitats for farming, only to be hunted down to the brink of extinction for taking cattle and sheep in their range.

Sebastian said tigers had their own personalities as some in India had been seen chasing and charging after rangers' vehicles, with anecdotal reports suggesting rare incidents of revenge killings.

He said he understood that while tigers involved in human-tiger conflict might have to be shot down in extreme cases, it was imperative for Perhilitan to show that it had exhausted all means of capturing them.

He also said that the public had to hold it accountable by asking tough questions.





A tiger spotted outside SK Balar's hostel fence in Gua Musang, Kelantan, on Monday. The tiger was also spotted in Pos Bihai on Friday. PIC COURTESY OF READER