KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

KERATAN SURAT KHABAR

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Inspiring place: Zulkifli (right) and Ilias strolling through the the Mangrove Forest Education Centre. – Photos by LIM BENG TATT/ The Star

Protect the remaining mangroves

Fishermen's association: Vital to protect endemic species for the good of all

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NIBONG TEBAL: Over 100ha of mangrove forests in Penang – almost equal to 60 football fields – has allegedly been destroyed to make way for development.

This in turn has driven coastal marine species towards extinction and exposed the local community to rising sea levels, said Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association (Pifwa) president Ilias Shafie.

Help is needed to protect the remaining mangroves, he said, which is an important fisheries source, besides stabilising the coastline ecosystem and preventing erosion.

He said prior to the 70s and 80s, most of Penang island was surrounded by mangrove forests which have slowly dissapeared due to development and erosion.

"The stretch along Bayan Lepas Industrial zone was originally a mangrove forest, but it has since given way to development.



Precious trees: Visitors at the centre admiring the beauty of nature.

"The only sizeable mangrove forest on the island now is in Balik Pulau and North Seberang Prai," he said during a recent interview at the Mangrove Forest Education Centre in Sungai Acheh.

Ilias urged the authorities to gazette the remaining tracts to protect the mangrove forest.

He said fishermen in Penang have the vast mangrove forest in Kuala Sepetang, Perak to thank for their livelihood.

The Matang Mangrove Forest in Kuala Sepetang covers about 40,000ha and was gazetted as a permanent forest reserve in 1906.

It is the largest in Peninsular Malaysia and is recognised as the best managed sustainable mangrove ecosystem in the world.

Ilias said mangrove forests serve as a habitat for thousands of species of marine and forest creatures, which is essential for a balanced ecosystem.

The forest also serves as a buffer for natural disasters, like tsunamis and typhoons.

"We have replanted more than 300,000 mangrove plants in the state," he added.

Sungai Acheh assemblyman Zulkifli Ibrahim said mangrove forests are not only important for the ecosystem in a particular area, but the local economy, too.

"My dream is to see these mangrove forests create opportunities, such as eco-tourism, for the folk in Sungai Acheh," he said.

Zulkifli said eco-tourism can be an alternative source of income for fishermen in Sungai Acheh while at the same time provide opportunities for locals to earn a living.

He hoped that Sungai Acheh will be included in the tourism map of Penang for the benefit of domestic and foreign tourists.

State environment committee chairman Phee Boon Poh, however, assured that the mangrove forests of Penang are far from dissapearing.

"The state government has identified all the mangrove forests in the state and is in the final stages of gazetting them as a permanent forest reserve," he assured.

The forests are now in the final survey stage before being sent to the State Legal Department for review and approval, he added.

In North Seberang Prai near the Kedah border, environmentalists highlighted in 2019 how a coastal mangrove forest grew from 200ha to 600ha after being left alone for about 20 years.

They have been calling for the tract to be gazetted as a protected forest reserve.