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Damage to site a setback for conservation efforts

HILARY CHIEW

PETALING JAYA: The degradation of the Rajah Brooke Birdwing habitat in Ulu Geroh, Perak is jeopardising the Government's biodiversity conservation programme earmarked under the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Supported by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE), the showy butterfly is one of the insects identified by the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (Frim) for a thorough inventory and research due to its endangered status and eco-tourism potential.

Frim's chief entomologist, Dr Laurence Kirton said although the butterfly is found throughout the central-western Main Range, there are only two known sites where the insects congregate and create a spectacular visual.

"Ulu Geroh and Tapah are the two places but the population in Ulu Geroh is the best I've seen so far. We've difficulties finding sites where the butterfly displayed (what we called) puddling behaviour that is vital for monitoring purposes.

"It's very sad that the Ulu Geroh site is being damaged... it would certainly have an adverse impact on the butterfly," he told *The Star* yesterday.

Frim's researchers were planning to include

the Ulu Geroh population into its existing study of the abundance of the Rajah Brooke Birdwing (*Trogonoptera brookiana albescens*) population this year. They have an on-going monitoring system in Tapah since September.

Contractors who were removing the historical Gopeng tin-mine pipeline have turned the puddling spot by the riverbank into muddy ground.

The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) decried the incident that happened just after the Friends of Ecotourism and Nature Conservation (Semai), an eco-tourism initiative headed by the orang asli villagers living within the area, won the President's Award in the Perak Tourism Appreciation Awards 2009 recently.

Located within the Bukit Kinta Forest Reserve, Ulu Geroh supports a healthy Rafflesia population and the seldom seen congregation of the Rajah Brooke Birdwing and is gaining popularity in the eco-tourism sector.

Its executive director Dr Loh Chi Leong regretted that the contractor failed to consult the villagers to find a least destructive way to carry out its activities.

He called upon the Perak State government and agencies responsible to take necessary measures to rehabilitate the destroyed sites.