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Great apes in the city

Ministry confirms creating novel orang utan sanctuary in KL

KHARLEEZ ZUBIN

KUALA LUMPUR: The government ended weeks of speculation on the setting up of an ape sanctuary in the city, by confirming that plans are afoot.

"Yes, it will be one-of-its-kind in the region and a semi-artificially created centre for the great apes, or *orang utan*," said Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Datuk Seri Douglas Uggah Embas, in a phone interview with *The Malay Mail*.

He said a committee had been set up to carry out a feasibility study and it will take some time as there are many factors to take into account.

"I don't want to set a time-frame as we have to give the committee the leverage to come up with the best solution," said Douglas.

"We want to be absolutely sure the *orang utan* can survive and breed in an artificially-created sanctuary."

Asked if it would be set up in Kepong at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), as

speculated by the media, he said the ministry was looking for a more suitable place.

"Kepong is too close to the city to be an ape sanctuary, really. Besides, FRIM is about forests and plants and not animals.

"Nevertheless, the location will be near the city so as to attract tourists but conducive and protective enough as a sanctuary for apes," he added.

On whether it would be similar to the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre which is just 20km from Kuching or the Sepilok *orang utan* sanctuary near Sandakan in Sabah, Douglas said that in Sabah, there was no threat of tigers to the apes.

"Here in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, the sanctuary is going to be different as we have to take into account a lot of factors," he said.

In a recent news report, FRIM director-general Datuk Dr. Abd Latif Mohmod denied a Tourism Ministry statement that the institute had requested the setting up of an *orang utan* sanctuary.

"*Orang utan* conservation comes under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan). We are a forest research centre focussing on flora,"

Dr Abd Latif had said.

The Tourism Ministry had recently announced that an *orang utan* sanctuary in Kuala Lumpur would be a big success and it would leave a lasting impression on visitors, in line with the government's intention to make eco-tourism a more prominent sector.

Deputy Tourism Minister Datuk Dr. James Dawos Mamit told the Press on Monday that some of the apes from Sepilok would be transferred to the sanctuary.

"The ape population there has increased and exceeded Sepilok's caring capacity which makes it difficult for the primates to get enough food," he had said.

Elaborating on the KL sanctuary, Douglas said it would incorporate extensive 'green design' initiatives for conservation and environmental sustainability.

He said the committee would, for additional assistance, assemble some world experts to create a sanctuary that would deliver an honourable home for the primates and set the standards for conservation efforts worldwide.

"It will not only be a sanctuary, but a tourism attraction and a research plus education centre," he said.

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