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Coastal swamp forests: Potential eco-system

This is the second in the series of two features on research of coastal forests.

KUALA LUMPUR: Did you know that the coastal swamp forest in Matang (HPL Matang) has been acknowledged as the best maintained coastal swamp forest in Malaysia, if not the world?

The work on maintaining the 101,877-hectare forest started 107 years ago and it has become a role model for the management of

other swamp forests in the country.

In HPL Matang, graded and systematic felling and cultivation of trees is done through a 30-year cycle, while 40,000 hectares of forest have been set aside for ecology studies.

According to the latest study on various swamp forests in Malaysia, HPL Matang has been highlighted as a land ecosystem which absorbs the highest carbon levels generated in the country. This also indicates the importance of an integrated forest management as the key to prosperous human life.

Forestry Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) Director-General Datuk Dr Abdul Latif Mohmod said the swamp forest ecosystem plays an important role in mitigating the effects of global warming and climate changes.

The carbon sequestration study carried out in several swamp forests, including those in Kedah and Johor, points out that HPL Matang has the highest carbon absorption rate up to 6.0 tonnes of carbon per hectare in a year.

"This proves that the importance of swamp forests is not only as a barrier against the Tsunami but also a crucial ecosystem that can absorb carbon," he said, on the sidelines of the National Seminar On R&D Projects On Coastal Mangroves In Malaysia.

The coastal mangroves play an important role in stabilising the

ecosystem along the coastal areas.

Dr Abdul Latif added that the swamp forests are wetlands rich in biodiversity and also function as an economic resource for the production of charcoal, firewood, pulp and construction materials, apart from being the habitat for breeding of marine life.

"Over the past 20 years, the nation's swamp forests had reportedly experienced drastic decrease in size due unsustainable land reclamation work for development and agriculture reasons," he said, attributing the scenario to the population growth.

In Malaysia, swamp forests were increasingly coming under reclamation work for projects to breed shrimps and arowana fish. This had compromised the potential ecosystem, apart from producing more carbon emissions and jeopardising the food resources for the future.

"The study reveals that coastal swamp forests must be main-

tained for the sake of future generations," Dr Abdul Latif said.

He added that the study, conducted by FRIM Geof ormation Programme, found that erosion had caused almost 20 per cent of the damage to costal swamp forests on the west coast of the Peninsula.

The seminar, attended by more than 110 researchers, academicians and representatives from government agencies, discussed 14 working papers related to the research carried out on the coastal areas.

Dr Abdul Latif noted that FRIM was also involved in studying the feasibility of various innovative and conventional cultivation techniques for high risk areas, apart from researching on the suitability of the soil, various tree diseases and production of saplings.

"In high risk areas, researchers and local residents planted 10,104 trees along the

coast from 2007 to 2010, using the innovative technique," he said.

The locations selected for this included Kampung Sungai Haji Dorani and Pulau Carey in Selangor, Kuala Gula in Perak, Kuala Sanglang (Perlis) and Kuala Muda in Pulau Pinang.

"The study shows that planting mangrove saplings using the Comp-Mat and Comp-Pillow techniques is effective in the high risk muddy coast, provided the planting is supported by wave-breaking structures known as the geotube.

"Without the innovative technique and geotube support, the tree planting will not be successful, due to factors such as big waves, soft soil, erosion and others," Dr Abdul Latif said.

He noted that a survey found that 76 per cent of 578 respondents were keen on being involved in planting trees along the coast.

This shows that there is an increased awareness among the society on the importance of having coastal swamp forests as a protection against strong wind and erosion.—Bernama

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