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Closed for public safety

THE Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) has decided recently to close our most popular forest trail known as "Rover Track" for public safety reasons.

We understand we will be facing protests from regular visitors who are very attached to this trail which they have been using for exercise for many years.

It was not an easy decision but one that we MUST take for the long-term sustainability of the forest in FRIM. The Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve, where the Rover Track and Canopy Walkway are located, is an important water catchment area, supplying water to Ulu Kepong residents for years.

In recent years, we have observed that with the increased number of visitors to FRIM, the top part of the hill, further up from where the Canopy Walkway is, has been constantly encroached upon by visitors. We have noted an increasing number of tree-falling incidents in recent years and are worried about the soil erosion occurring along the trail leading up to the walkway.

We tried to close the old path leading to the Canopy Walkway trail for recovery, and offered a new one but the old area continued to be encroached upon. Some regular visitors began making new trails of their own to get to the top of the hill.

The increased number of people going up the illegal trails, ignoring the no-entry signage, has worsened the soil erosion and these paths become streams during heavy downpours.

We have had a few frightening incidents of "head water" like flooding at the Sungai Kroh picnic area, with the recent one happening just last weekend. We were fortunate that these incidents occurred late in the evening when there were no visitors.

Following the heavy downpour, many trees and branches fell along the Rover Track and our Canopy Walkway was damaged by an uprooted healthy tree last Monday night.

But our visitors could not care less and continued to use the trail,

walking past the fallen branches oblivious to the presence of snakes. Some even climbed over the fallen tree to get through (*pic*). While they do not mind putting their lives in danger, FRIM cannot allow this to continue.

We need to conduct damage and safety assessments, as well as get some work done there once the weather stabilises. In the meantime, we cannot have people going through these dangerous paths. We know we have to give the eroded areas of the forest some time to heal and recover from years of regular use.

In recent years, we have seen a drastic increase in visitors, both locals and foreigners. Their interest in FRIM helped to promote the institute as an important tourism destination and we appreciate this.

FRIM has opened its doors to the public for recreational purposes for more than 20 years. However, right now, we must close part of the forest trails for recovery and we would like to appeal to our visitors, particularly the regular ones with jogging passes, to respect this decision for the long-term sustainability of the forest.

The increased soil erosion uphill may be the reason for the more rapid incidents of flooding downstream which are affecting FRIM and the neighbouring houses. The recent floods caused a lot of damage to the campus facilities. Parts of our concrete fence were destroyed and some vehicles were damaged, including a motorcycle, which was washed away by the gushing waters of Sg Kroh that also brought down logs and debris. It is frightening to imagine this happening when we have many visitors.

After last weekend's flooding incidents and what happened to the Canopy Walkway, we knew we could not delay the decision to close the area. We made the announcement on Oct 13, and put up temporary notices to prevent visitors from entering the Rover Trail. However, I was informed that despite the notice, a number

of visitors ignored it and followed others into the forest.

I was appalled to see the pictures taken by staff who were working at the FRIM Canopy Walkway site where signs of further erosion could be seen.

I would like to urge visitors, especially the regulars, to understand and respect our decision to close the Rover Track. We need them to leave the forest alone for it to recover naturally for a while.

We may need to do some tree planting later and only when the area has recovered sufficiently can we consider reopening the trail.

Please understand that forests offer much more than just a place for exercise, rest and respite from your busy, stressful life. It serves many crucial functions like providing natural resources, oxygen and water, and preventing floods.

However, a forest cannot serve these functions well if its health is threatened. If your body is unwell, you need to give it a good rest and time for recovery. It is the same with the forest ecosystems.

It took nearly 100 years for the FRIM campus to become what it is today from an old mining area. It will need a few years for the forest to recover.

In the meantime, FRIM visitors are still welcome to make use of other facilities in the main campus and the Kepong Botanic Gardens for exercising.

FRIM is an icon for Selangor as a forest park for recreational activities and an important tourist destination. We have been rated 4-Star by TripAdvisor and received lots of good publicity on these aspects.

In the coming months, we will need to assess the damage and conduct repairs on the Canopy Walkway. This could take some time because the walkway system depends on several living trees, of which one was injured recently, and there is no other alternative in sight.

We hope for understanding and we thank all our visitors for their cooperation.

ABD LATIF MOHMAD
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Malaysia

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