

Headline	Community all fired up to protect peat swamp		
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Community all fired up to protect peat swamp

WITH the current dry and hot weather, the risk of forest fires happening is extremely high and tropical peat swamp forests are especially vulnerable to destruction by fire because the soil itself is extremely flammable when dry.

With that in mind and the memory of destructive fires during the 2014 dry season, community members from Mukim Ayer Hitam in Johor together with officers from the Forestry Department recently took part in a two-day course on prevention and techniques on how to put out peat swamp forests.

"The forest here is prone to fires so we must always be prepared. The volunteer firemen from the local community are the first responders when this happens so they must be prepared," said the Penghulu for Mukim Ayer Hitam, Mohd Afezan Yahya.

"The training has provided them with the knowledge and techniques to deal with the fires that could happen anywhere," he added. Aside from putting out fires, the course also educated the community on preventive measures that can be caused by themselves through open burning or land

clearing.

Ayer Hitam is home to the only remaining peat swamp forest in the state - the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve - that is under threat from the agriculture industry and has already been drained in some areas to supply water to the surrounding plantations and estates.

Covering 3,7979 hectares, the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve which is located in the district of Muar is part of the two year "Water For Life" programme where Coca-Cola is working to rehabilitate an area of it in partnership with Yayasan Kemanusiaan Muslim Aid Malaysia (Muslim Aid) together with the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) and Johor State Forestry Department.

FRIM and the Forestry Department will provide the technical advice, restoration and rehabilitation work while Muslim Aid will coordinate and manage the project and community outreach.

The goal of the project is to increase water reserves in the area by rehabilitating degraded parts of the peat swamp forest to a level where it will hold more water, eventually leading to an increase of biodiversity.

This sustainable programme will

create opportunities for the local community to engage in ecotourism activities as a result of the rehabilitation, thus their support and involvement for the Water For Life project activities are vital.

In conjunction with International Day of Forests that fell during the firefighting course, the participants also planted 500 trees as part of the rehabilitation effort. Peat swamp trees *kelat paya* and *bintangor* were selected for their hardy nature and resistance to hot and dry weather.

Johor Forestry Department Director, Mohd Ridza Bin Awang said, "Johor is unique because it has all three types of Malaysian rainforests - dryland, mangrove and peat swamp with the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve being the only peat swamp forest in the state, and thus crucial to be protected.

"Peat swamp forests are an important part of the ecosystem and because of the degradation in this area, water replenishment is an important part of its conservation that Coca-Cola is hoping to achieve," said Coca-Cola Malaysia's Public Affairs and Communications Director, Kadri Taib.

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JOHOR Forestry Department Director, Mohd Ridza Bin Awang planting a tree to regenerate the forest