Headline	Acacias put Sabah at a greater fire risk		
MediaTitle	Daily Express (KK)		
Date	22 Apr 2016	Color	Full Color
Section	Nation	Circulation	25,055
Page No	4	Readership	75,165
Language	English	ArticleSize	341 cm²
Journalist	Kan Yaw Chong	AdValue	RM 1,757
Frequency	Daily (EM)	PR Value	RM 5,270

Acacias put Sabah at a greater fire risk

Kan Yaw Chong

KOTA KINABALU: This raging wildfire left a five-acre plot, dominated by lalang (Imperata cylindrical) in ashes on Sunday.

The episode at the junction of Jalan Penampang and Jalan Pelandúk had been a recurring hotspot over the years.

The thick mat of dry lalang grassland aided by a smattering of acacia mangium woodland provides perfect combustible materials to ignite a comprehensive bush fire in these hotter and drier months.

People cause most wildfires, cigarette butts thrown may be but given its repeat at this particular site every dry season, most likely arson started it all with a simple ignition as a lighted match.

Lightning can and have caused wildland fires that burnt vast territories in other countries like US, since the electric current is very hot and when it comes in contact with an object such as a tree in a dry spot like this, heat rises very quickly and fire starts.

Interestingly, a 2001 study done by Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) into the cause of forest fires says it's largely anthropogenic in origins and exonerated climatic factor.

The problem in Sabah is compounded by the invasive acacia mangium, a native of Queensland, Australia.

The problem is this native flora of Australia relies on bush fires as a means of reproduction.

Visit the bushfire aftermath of any acacia mangium woodland to see the madlum of dense seedlings that would have sprouted.

So Sabah now has the misfortune of widespread cover of fast growing and weedy acacia magnum even in almost every open urban lands which flares up the landscape everywhere come every distinct dry season.

An International Tropical Timber Organisation once said: "The problem is it doesn't have the bacteria to digest acacia leaves efficiently."

The result is a typical build up of hardy but oily acacia mangium leaf litters and seed pods which somehow ignite everywhere during the hot and dry months.

From the perspective of acacia mangium, fire events are an essential part of their ecology, which originally was a natural part of natural Australian forestry.

Introduced to tropical Sabah where the tropical rainforest once reigned supreme but now acacia mangium takes over every open space at the first opportunity, people like Tony Lamb had expressed concern that the weed may burn its invasion into every rain forest and eventually take over, little by little.

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Aftermath of the wildfire.