

Headline	Fired up to protect peat swamp forest		
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# Fired up to protect peat swamp forest

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

Residents of Mukim Ayer Hitam in Johor, together with officers from the state Forestry Department, took part in a two-day course on prevention and techniques on how to put out peat swamp forests recently.

“The forest here is prone to fires so we must be prepared. Volunteer firemen from the local community are the first responders so they must be ready,” said village chief Mohd Afezan Yahya.

“The course has given them the knowledge and techniques to deal with fires that could happen anywhere.”

The course also highlighted measures of preventing fires that are caused by open burning or land clearing.

Ayer Hitam is home to the only remaining peat swamp forest in the state. However, the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve 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 3,797ha, the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve, is part of a two-year ‘Water For Life’ programme with Coca-Cola, Yayasan Kemanusiaan Muslim Aid Malaysia, the Forest Research Institute Malaysia and Johor Forestry Department.

The project aims 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.

In conjunction with International Day of Forests, 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.

The department’s director Mohd Ridza Awang said Johor is unique because it has all three types of Malaysian rainforests — dryland, mangrove and peat swamp. He added it was crucial to protect the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve.

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Mohd Ridza planting a tree at the Ayer Hitam Forest Reserve.