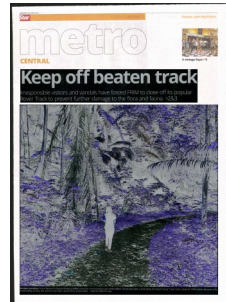


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Keep off beaten track

Irresponsible visitors and vandals have forced FRIM to close off its popular Rover Track to prevent further damage to the flora and fauna. >2&3

Visitors barred from FRIM's popular trail

Action taken to protect forest from being damaged by overcrowding and irresponsible hikers



story by
GRACE CHEN

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LAST October, the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) made the difficult decision to close access to the popular 5km-long Rover Track which leads to the Canopy Walkway for safety reasons.

However, many frequent trekkers, joggers and cyclists to the area continued to ignore the "no entry sign" and also vandalised the sensors and closed-circuit television cameras installed to prevent trespassing.

As a result, FRIM had to take the drastic measure of erecting a gate to bar visitors from entering the Rover Track on June 13.

FRIM forestry and environment division assistant research officer

Wan Mohd Nafizul Wan Ahmad said some officers who had tried to prevent people from entering the trail had been met with insults.

One lost his motorcycle after a trespasser pushed it down the canyon.

FRIM ecotourism and urban forestry programme head Dr Noor Azlin Yahya said the trail had been closed in the interest of conservation following a dramatic jump in the number of visitors over the last four years.

In 2014, log books recorded a total of 1.2 million arrivals.

"The forest cannot cope with such large crowds," she said.

Officials also decided to put up the gate to prevent further encroachment from hikers who were creating their own trails seriously.

To-date, five illegal trails going up the hill had been identified.

According to Dr Noor Azlin, the track was never meant for public use in the first place.

She said the track was a 'sensitive' area as it provided access to Lagong

Peak which was part of the Titiwangsa Range, an area rich in biodiversity.

Last year, FRIM officials were horrified to discover that a group of hikers had hacked their way up the peak from FRIM.

"People may think that it's 'adventurous' to carry a *parang* and hack their way through a jungle.

"They do not realise that they may be destroying species of flora and fauna which could be at the brink of extinction," she said.

But she stressed that FRIM was not closing its doors to the public.

"Remember we have 500ha.

"There are many other places and facilities the public can enjoy.

"We are just restricting access to the track as it was never meant to be a public recreation area but rather for maintenance and research," said Dr Noor Azlin.

Safety is another consideration as falling trees can pose a danger to hikers.

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"As many of the trees in FRIM are over 80 years old, they can fall. Last year, a tree fell on the walkway.

"I have seen hikers on the hill taking selfies next to fallen trunks, not realising how dangerous it is," she said.

Dr Noor Azlin added that the public needed to be educated on the importance of preserving forest reserves in their natural state.

She cited the Bukit Gasing forest reserve in Petaling Jaya as an example where misguided enthusiasts had planted heliconias at the entrance.

"These are exotic species that can invade and destroy our natural species and have a detrimental effect on the ecology," she said.

FRIM is already experiencing the negative consequences, said its corporate communication unit media officer Toh An Nee.

Last year, flash floods hit the Sungai Kroh picnic area twice.

In both incidents, water rose up to the parking areas, washing motorcycles away.

"This is the first time we had experienced this.

"It is not a good sign," she said.

In a bid to preserve the integrity of the 90-year-old manmade forest, Dr Noor Azlin has proposed reducing the number of visitors by half.

At popular spots like the Sungai Kroh picnic area, Rumah Terengganu and Melaka House, the numbers would be cut by more than half if the proposal goes through.

It is a solution that most visitors

should welcome.

A recent poll revealed 80% of visitors agreeing that FRIM was overcrowded on weekends and public holidays.

"Although more visitors means higher entrance fee collection, we would also have to spend more on maintenance of facilities like the car parks and public toilets.

"It is better that we focus on preserving the forest."

"The loss of a tree may not be immediately evident but they play a valuable role in our ecosystem by preventing soil erosion and releasing water and oxygen," said Dr Noor Azlin.

FRIM intends to gradually shift the focus back to education by allowing access to most of the trails only to those with research interests.

Toh said some Ulu Kepong residents who went to FRIM regularly for their morning walks and jog have accused the institute of punishing the majority of nature lovers for the crimes of a few.

"They say the alternative suggestion of a recreational and exercise area in the Kepong Botanic Gardens, located within the campus grounds, is not as beautiful as the lush green route at Rover Track.

"People must realise that this is a water catchment area.

"Water does not come out from a pipe but from the forest. And when the forest is affected, so is our water supply.

"We need to look at the bigger picture," said Toh.



This taxi, with the driver most probably acting as a tourist guide, was found driving along the Rover Track which is closed to public vehicles.



A visitor and his four-wheel drive was also spotted on the Rover Track.

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Verdant paradise: Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) corporate communication unit media officer Toh An Nee takes a stroll along the forest's Rover Track. Once a draw for FRIM visitors because of its breathtaking scenery, the trail has now been closed off for preservation. – GRACE CHEN/The Star

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5 Wan Mohd Nafizul in front of the Rover Trail which is now under lock and key.



2 The sign board showing the way to the Canopy Walkway has been taken down by vandals.



3 A FRIM officer straightening a 'No Entry' sign which was brought down by vandals.



4 The Kepong Botanical Park located in the FRIM campus is offered as another alternative for joggers.



5 Dr Noor Azlin said the Rover Track was closed to preserve the integrity of Bukit FRIM as a water catchment area.



6 Rubbish left by thirsty hikers is polluting the track.



7 Hikers squeezing through fallen trees unaware of the danger their in.

— Photos: GRACE CHEN/The Star