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# Visitors barred from FRIM's popular trail

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

story and photo by  
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## KUALA LUMPUR

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 trekkers, joggers and cyclists who frequent 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 a canyon.

FRIM ecotourism and urban forestry programme head Dr Noor Azlin Yahya said the trail had been closed in the interest of conserva-

tion following a dramatic jump in the number of visitors over the last four years.

In 2014, log books showed 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.

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 is 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 Noor Azlin.

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

"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.

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

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of the 90-year-old manmade forest, 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 is 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 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.

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Hikers continue to squeeze through fallen trees at the Rover Track unaware that a shift in weight can cause the trunks to roll and crush them to death.



Rubbish left by thirsty hikers is polluting the track.



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



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