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Taman Tugu tokenism

AS a nature lover who likes nothing better than a day trekking in the jungle, I can testify to the unique heritage of Malaysia's ancient and richly biodiverse forests, unique complex ecosystems of plants and animals which are in need of protection and conservation.

It was thus with alarm that I read of the plan to create Tugu Park in the capital city centre with transplanted plants and animals and other "tourist attractions" at a cost of more than RM600 million. I don't get it, nature has granted us the priceless unique gift of tropical jungles only 20 minutes from the city centre so why even try to reinvent the wheel here? At what cost and for what purpose? Even suggesting that such a park should be a priority reflects a terrible tendency among city planners for grandiosity and tokenism.

If the park is intended to serve a similar purpose to that of London's Hyde Park and New York's Central Park, then surely another park like Lake Gardens with minimal maintenance requirements would serve the purpose well and at a fraction of the cost.

Outside the capital, developers and municipal councils have destroyed and built on green spaces. More than 10 years ago, a vast tract of the Bukit Sungai Putih Permanent Forest Reserve (gazetted in 1932) just 20 minutes from the city centre, and next to my neighbourhood, was degazetted and destroyed for housing projects. More recently, a developer destroyed the remaining green lung in our housing estate, a forested hill. Jungle paths on nearby Bukit Apek are threatened with "development" despite the fact that hundreds of city folk flock there every weekend for the wellbeing that comes from hill climbing in pristine surroundings.

Besides this destruction of green lungs in and near our Taman, we have observed the felling of so many large old trees by local authorities. One of the most beautiful and cooling features of Malaysian towns and villages is our heritage of banyan trees and even these are not spared. Just recently, three huge healthy looking banyan trees were hacked down near our local market.

One excuse was that they were diseased and cutting them down prevents contamination. When, some time ago, our residents association had asked the Kajang Council to prune the trees around the only playground in our Taman the council suggested they cut down all the trees instead. And although we said, "No way", a short time later the council felled ALL the trees around the playground that were at least 40 years old. Their excuse was that the trees were diseased.

When we notice the many "Nak potong pokok" signs around the area, we realise that

it costs ratepayers a few thousand ringgit to have an imperious banyan tree cut down in its prime.

How are these decisions made? It is vital that the **Forest Research Institute of Malaysia** investigate whether trees cut by local councils have indeed been stricken by tree-inflicting disease. State governments should be accountable as to the number of trees cut and the amount spent by municipal councils on such contracts. The MACC must investigate if there are favoured contractors who are given the bulk of these contracts.

The Selangor government has proposed degazetting 106.65ha of four forest reserves that form part of the Selangor State Park for the construction of the Kuala Lumpur Outer Ring Road, also known as the East Klang Valley Expressway. By degazetting the Ulu Langat Forest Reserve, Bukit Sungei Puteh Forest Reserve, Ampang Forest Reserve, and Ulu Gombak Forest Reserve, these forests will lose their "forest reserve" status and will be fair game for developers. The Selangor State Park happens to be the third largest park in Peninsular Malaysia. It was gazetted in 2007 as a state park under the National Forestry Act Enactment 2005 of Selangor and is managed by the Forestry Department of Selangor.

These forests are not only rich in biodiversity but provide crucial water catchments.

This grandiose Tugu Park plan is another blatant example of the unequal sharing of our collective resources.

A socially responsible urban policy aimed at ensuring the overall physical and mental health of all our people and especially our children, would provide a park near every housing estate. A sound urban tree policy would protect and sustain green lungs and ensure that all new development includes a green lung or park.

This need is even more urgent around low-cost high-rise housing. Singapore's Urban Redevelopment Authority has seen this need with a policy of "Providing 0.8ha of green park space for every 1,000 persons and increasing greenery in every high rise buildings to 50ha by 2030". Do we have such a policy in Malaysia?

In contrast, token green elephant ventures such as this proposed Tugu Park must be seen in the light of the destruction of real forests within 30 minutes of the city centre and the stressful long-term impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of citizens deprived of local green spaces.

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