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# Drones, DNA tests to fight illegal logging

## HIGH-TECH WAY: Terengganu wants to catch illegal loggers red-handed


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*Forestry Department director **Datuk Ahmad Fadzil Abdul Majid** (inset) says using technology **gives his department an edge** over spies and tontos.*

THERE are eyes from the sky panning down the vast expanse of forests to root out land encroachment and illegal logging in Terengganu.

The eyes — drones fitted with infrared camera — are the latest technology used by the state Forestry Department to protect logs from being stolen and forests from being destroyed by land encroachment.

With only 150 officers to cover 544,000ha of forest reserve, of which 128,000ha are permanently protected as water catchment areas, the use of high technology is not a luxury, but a necessity.

Department director Datuk Ahmad Fadzil Abdul Majid said illegal logging and encroachment could be addressed by catching the culprits red-handed.

"Using the latest technology to outsmart spies and tontos gives officers an edge in operations," he told the *New Straits Times*.

He said the department was also using satellite data and DNA-profiling of trees to curb illegal logging.

However, he said the success of operations depended on the integrity of officers.

"In every organisation, there are black sheep. Some officers have been working in the same post for more than 20 years, and there is a possibility that they have formed ties with illegal loggers."

Fadzil said the DNA-profiling of trees was being developed with co-operation from the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM).

When the system was ready, he said, the department would call in experts from FRIM to match the DNA of tree stumps with logs seized ex-situ or in sawmills.

"This will help us strengthen our case when we charge illegal loggers.

"However, it is difficult to charge masterminds unless we catch them red-handed.

"Fingerprints do not stick on tree barks. Illegal logging is not like house break-ins, where fingerprints of suspects can be traced.

"But, we can identify culprits by following the log trail. Every tree has a specific DNA profile."

Fadzil said illegal logging not only damaged the credibility of the department, but also ruined the ecosystem and incurred losses to the state government.

He said Terengganu had an annual coupe of 6,388ha until the end of the 11th Malaysia Plan in 2020, and the state had earned RM32 million from legal logging.

"Although illegal logging constitutes only about 0.2 per cent of losses, the damage is glaring."

The forestry sector contributed RM22 million in premiums and RM12 million in taxes yearly to the state's coffers.

"It (illegal logging) is not as bad as depicted in newspapers, but we need to highlight our operations to keep illegal loggers at bay.

"Our exposure of such activities invites negative perception, but if we do not act, the entire system will collapse and result in a massive loss of revenue in the long term."

The department sets aside RM11 million annually, or RM1,800 per hectare, to rehabilitate forests that have been logged. However, it spent only about RM3 million to rehabilitate about 20 per cent of 6,388ha (annual coupe) of forests.

Fadzil said Terengganu had 416,000ha of productive forests, or 40 per cent of state land that could be logged over 30 years, but illegal logging could jeopardise efforts to ensure sustainability of forests.


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