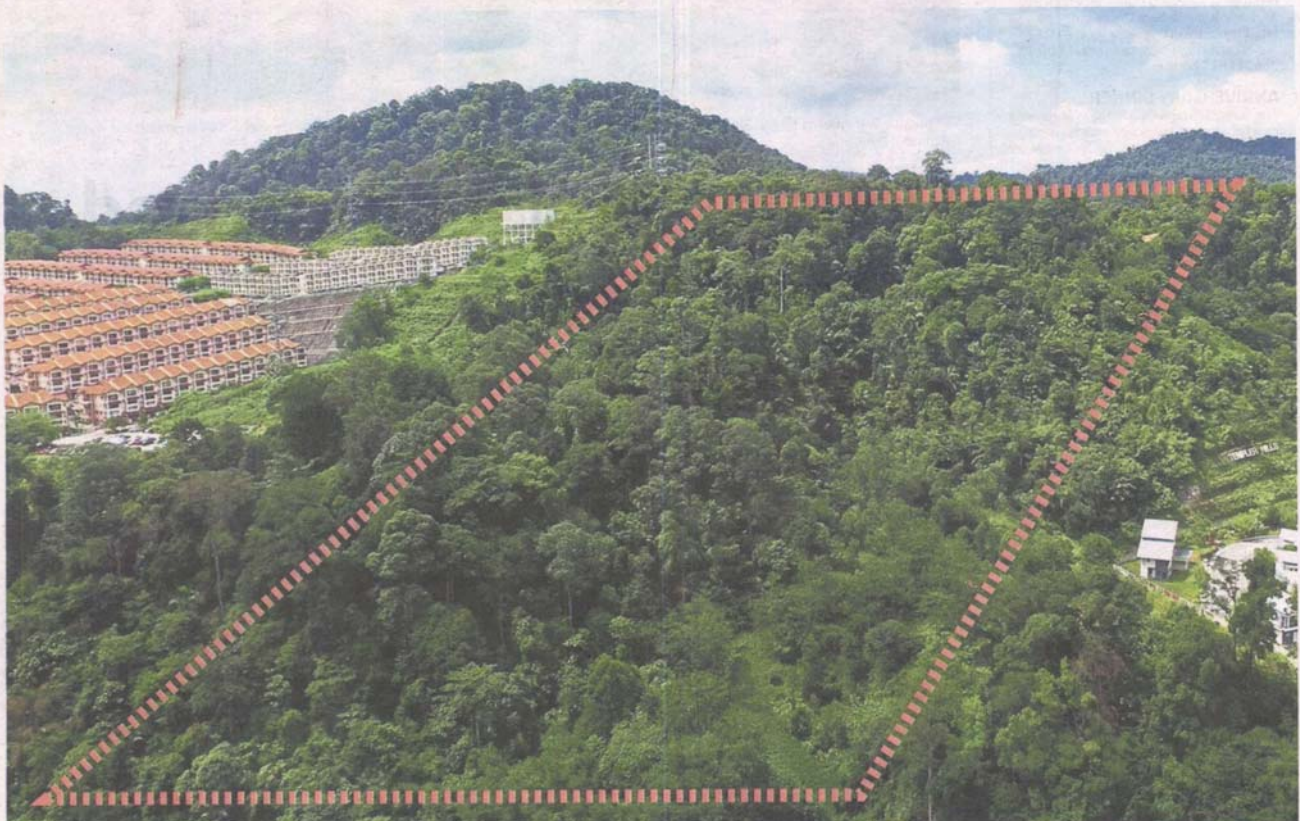


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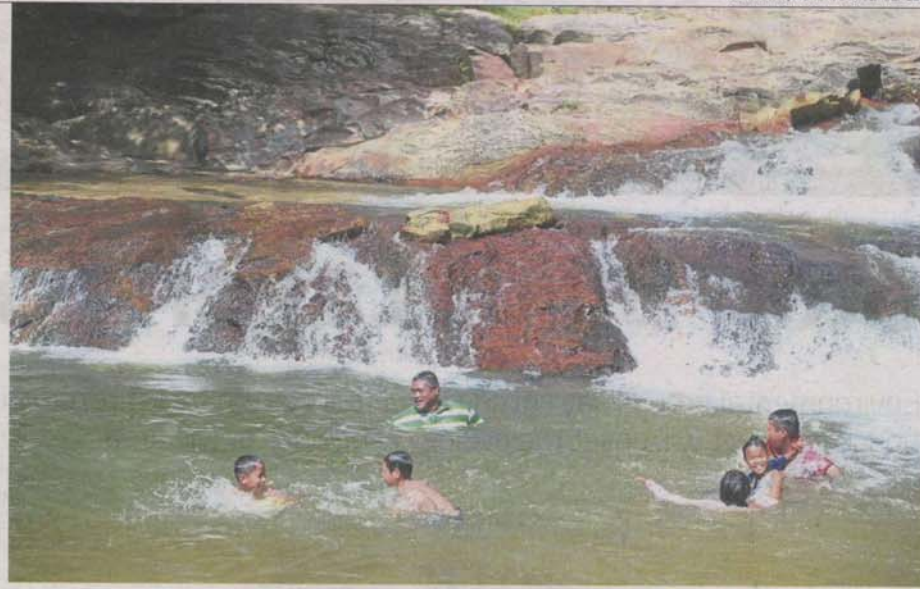
Stop Bukit Lagong project

Environmental groups say cutting down part of the forest reserve in Gombak for a housing project will upset the ecological balance of the area. >2&3



Making way: An aerial view of the proposed housing development that would involve the degazetting of 28.3ha of the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in Gombak. — FAIHAN GHANI/The Star

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The pristine waterfall at Taman Rimba Bukit Lagong is one of the main attractions, the forest reserve also serves as an important water catchment area.

Housing project proposed within forest reserve

EXCLUSIVE

Public hearing on Bukit Lagong degazettement ongoing until Dec 22

By SHALINI RAVINDRAN
shaliniravindran@thestar.com.my

A 30-day public hearing is ongoing to seek feedback on a proposal to degazette a part of the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in Gombak for a housing development project.

The degazettement exercise involves an area totalling 28.3ha near the fringe of the permanent forest reserve.

The Selangor Forestry Department placed a notice in major dailies on Nov 23 inviting stakeholders in the Gombak district to voice their objections to the proposal within 30 days.

The public hearing is in accordance with the Public Inquiry (Selangor) Rules 2014, as well as National Forestry Act (Adoption) Enactment 1985, which makes the exercise (placement of notice) compulsory before a forest reserve can be degazetted.

The Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve lies adjacent to the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong and stretches over 3,624.1ha.

According to the proposed plans displayed at the Selangor Forestry Department office in Shah Alam, the said housing development could be located on a strip of land between two residential areas namely Taman Aman suria and Templer Hills.

The proposed site is only 2km away from the forest reserve's recreational area of Taman Rimba Bukit Lagong and Kampung Orang Asli Bukit Lagong.

Risky precedent

This marks the fourth time the Selangor government is holding a public hearing prior to the degazettement of forest reserve since the Public Inquiry (Selangor) Rules 2014 was put in place.

In 2014, a hearing was held on the degazettement of 106.65ha of the Ampang Forest Reserve for the construction of East Klang Valley Expressway (EKVE).

In 2016, two hearings were held for the proposals to degazette 30ha of Sungai Puteh



Some houses in Kampung Orang Asli Bukit Lagong are located very close to the proposed site.

North and South Forest Reserves for the Sungai Besi-Ulu Klang Highway (SUKU) project, as well as 3.4ha of the Bukit Cherakah Forest Reserve for the Damansara-Shah Alam Elevated Expressway (DASH) project.

All three highways are now in different stages of completion.

Environmental groups are concerned that the degazettement of forest reserves have set a bad precedent.

Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) Selangor vice-chairman Wong Ee Lynn said the degazettement could "encourage" other developers to apply for land in forested areas for development.

"What then is there to stop further encroachment into the forest? They could reason that there is already existing infrastructure and amenities so it would be easier to build," she said.

In an earlier statement, Wong said any proposed development in an ecologically sensitive area with high conservation and high biodiversity value would adversely affect more than just people living in the immediate vicinity of the site.

"While the Selangor government's action of calling for feedback and opening the pro-

posed development for public inspection is an encouraging indication of greater transparency and participatory democracy, it must be emphasised that the opinion of the citizens, engineering professionals, and scientific and conservation community must also be taken into account, whether or not they have *locus standi* to object to the proposed development.

"The clearing of forests for roads and construction will increase air and water pollution and the risk of soil erosion and landslides. The destruction of watershed areas will affect the entire state's water supply and quality.

"The opening up of access roads will create access not only for construction vehicles, but also illegal loggers, poachers and wildlife traffickers," she said.

Wong added that the proposed Bukit Lagong development project should be immediately and irrevocably scrapped.

In a statement, Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) president S.M. Mohamed Idris said the proposal to excise part of the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve contravened one of the main strategies of the Selangor Forestry Department to maintain existing permanent forest reserves and increase its area.

"It also contravenes the goals and targets of

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The scenic Taman Rimba Bukit Lagong provides much-needed respite for urbanites.



The adventure park at Taman Rimba Bukit Lagong managed by the Selayang Municipal Council (MPS) draws its fair share of outdoor enthusiasts.



The Kampung Orang Asli Bukit Lagong consists of a number of families and is located about 2km away from the proposed site.

the Peninsular Malaysia Forestry Department to achieve five million hectares of permanent forest reserves cover in peninsular Malaysia.

"Maintaining the existing hectareage of all forest reserves in the Klang Valley is of paramount importance because the forests here play a role in balancing the physical development with natural surroundings," he said.

Taman Amansjara resident Ange Tan said they are worried that disturbance to the surrounding hillside could trigger landslide.

"There have been several cases of landslides in the area, especially during the construction of new developments," she said.

A platform to object

Selangor Forestry Department director Datuk Dr Mohd Puat Dahalan said the proposal for a mixed development project had been received by the State Executive Council.

"Part of the process is to carry out a public inquiry calling for public's input to voice their opinions and suggestions.

"Even if there is a proposal to degazette one hectare of forest reserve land, we have to call for a public hearing," he said when contacted.

He explained that once feedback was collected, a public hearing with the affected par-

ties would be called within 30 days of notice expiration.

"This will then be brought to the Selangor Economic Action Council (MTES) that is chaired by the state mentri besar (Amirudin Shari)," Dr Mohd Puat said.

He added that should any forest reserve area be excised, it would have to be replaced on a one-to-one basis.

"This means that the party that acquires the land would have to acquire adjacent land that is of equal or larger in size than the excised land.

"The land will then be handed back to the state to be gazetted as forest reserve," he said, adding the replacement land would be contiguous with the forest area.

He said that almost 32% of Selangor consisted of forest reserves totalling 250,209ha.

"We are following the rules and procedures that have been set in place, which allows concerned citizens to voice out before any action is taken to excise the land," he said.

Dr Mohd Puat added that currently, Selangor was the only state practising public hearing before any hectare of forest reserve could be degazetted and the process of its replacement must be concurrently carried out with the excising of the land.