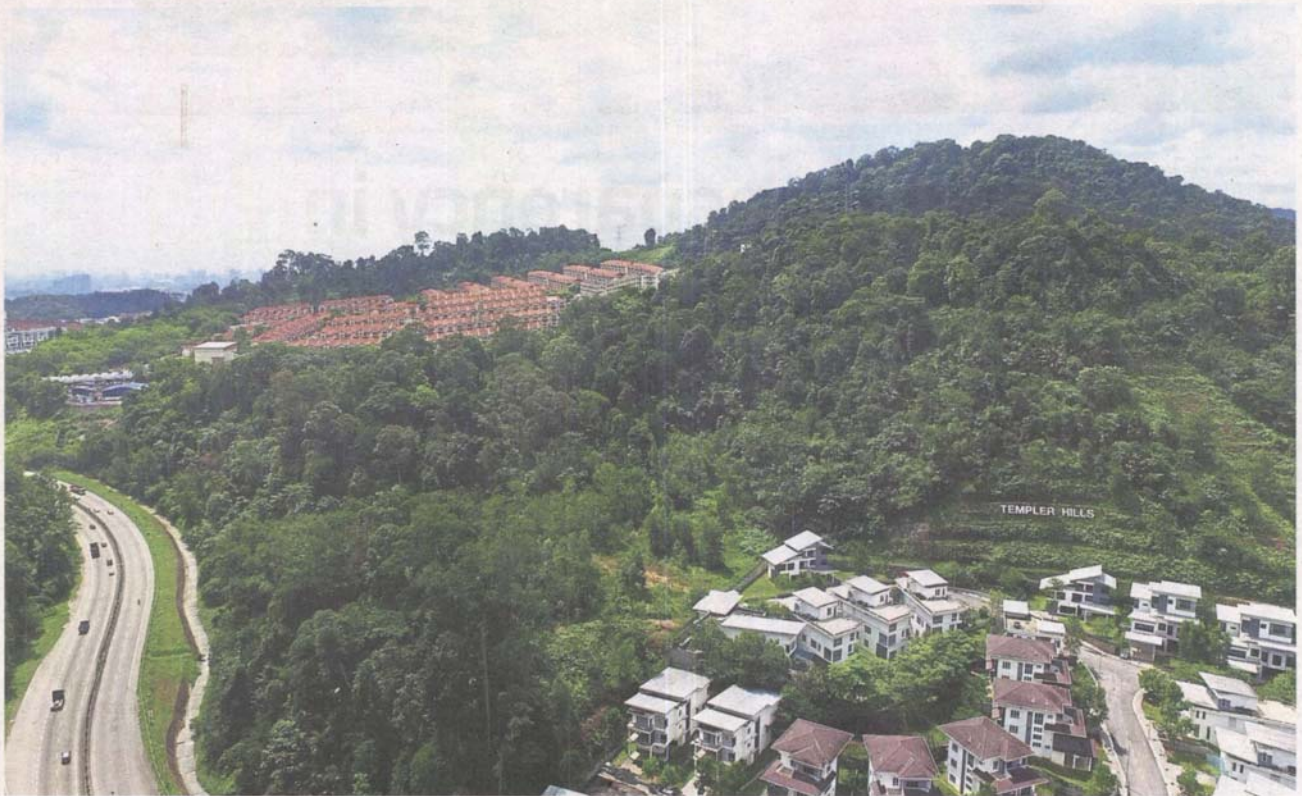


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Date	06 Dec 2018	Color	Full Color
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Clarity needed in decision

The proposal to degazette 28.3ha site in Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in Gombak was made only after planning approval was given for a housing project, says Selangor government. > 2&3



Nature at stake: Aerial view of the proposed housing development that will involve the degazettement of a 28.3ha plot in the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve. The area, located between Taman Amansiara (background, red roofs) and Templer Hills (foreground right), is one of the last few wildlife corridors connecting Bukit Lagong to the Kanching and Templer recreational forests (on the left).

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An aerial view of the proposed housing development that would involve the degazettement of 28.3ha of the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in Gombak.

By SHALINI RAVINDRAN
and PRIYA MENON
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PLANNING approval for a proposed housing project at Bukit Lagong, Gombak was given to Selangor State Development Corporation (PKNS) even before the proposal to degazette the forest reserve.

State Environment, Green Technology, Consumer and Non-Islamic Affairs Committee chairman Hee Loy Sian said PKNS was given the green light for the project in 2003 by the Selangor State Executive Council (MMKN) but it was not carried out.

Hee said the land was no longer suitable as a forest reserve as it was surrounded by housing developments, hence the decision to excise the 28.3ha area.

He added that PKNS had identified a replacement forest reserve in Broga, Semenyih that would be gazetted as a forest reserve instead.

"The replacement land is also a forest owned by PKNS. It is located below Broga Hill.

"It is already a forested area and will be gazetted as forest reserve. The area is much larger than the one in Bukit Lagong.

"This will also protect Broga Hill as a recreational area as it is famous with hikers," he said in the state assembly yesterday.

Selayang Municipal Council (MPS), he said, in its Local Draft Plan (Replacement) 2030 designated the site in contention as a housing zone.

On Monday, *StarMetro* reported that there would be 30-day public hearing seeking feedback on a proposal to degazette part of the Bukit Lagong forest reserve for the project.

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.

A wildlife corridor

The move to degazette the forest, one of the last wildlife corridors, will jeopardise the movement of

'No transparency in degazettement exercise'

NGOs and stakeholders highlight misleading information relating to proposal to develop 28.3ha land in forest reserve



Leela says NGOs and stakeholders should be well informed on any degazettement exercise.

animals living in the area, environmental groups said.

Treat Every Environment Special (Trees), along with Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and Global Environment Center (GEC) are questioning state authorities for wanting to degazette the forest.

MNS president Ahmad Ismail said the identified area was one of the last wildlife corridors connecting the forest reserve to the Kanching and Templer recreational forests, which made up part of the Selangor State Park.

The state park is classified Rank 1 Environmentally Sensitive Area under the National Physical Plan, and accorded highest protection.

"Breaking this link will cause the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve to become an 'island' and the entire forest ecosystem will be doomed.

"Even the area's microclimate will be affected, which will have a cascading effect on the forest's bio-



diversity," he said. Ahmad said any development in the forest could also affect more than 100 species of birds. "The noise from the construction will be a major factor. Any trees cut down will jeopardise nesting sites. "Additionally, it can affect flight paths of migratory birds," he said. Trees director Leela Panikkar said that hilly terrain consisted of Class III and Class IV slopes. Class 1 is the least severe in terms of terrain grading where

slope angles are less than 15 degrees. Slopes with angles greater than 35 degrees are classified as Class IV as they pose the highest risk. She said checks at MPS showed that the local draft plan did not indicate the land was part of the permanent forest reserve. "This is very misleading and creates a misconception. Anyone looking at the draft plan will assume that the area was degazetted but this is not the case," she said.

MNS senior advisor Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor said the state authorities should not disturb gazetted forests for any type of development. "There are other forested areas that are degraded which can be utilised, but not an area as strategic as Bukit Lagong. "If there is a need for more housing, Selangor has many abandoned housing projects that should be seriously looked into before opening up more land. "Why take the easy route to

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StarMetro's front-page report on Monday.



Several families still reside at the Bukit Lagong Orang Asli village located about 2km away from the proposed project site. — Filepic

“If there is a need for more housing, Selangor has many abandoned housing projects that should be seriously looked into before opening up more land. Why take the easy route to destroy a forest for selfish gains?”



Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor

destroy a forest for selfish gains?” he said.

Affecting livelihoods

GEC Outreach and Partnership Programme coordinator Adelaine Tan said any development would impact the environment and indigenous communities.

“The Bukit Lagong orang asli, who live close to the forest reserve’s boundary, rely heavily on forest resources for their sustenance and also for their income,” she said.

Pertubuhan Pelindung Khazanah Alam Malaysia (Peka) president Puan Sri Shariffa Sabrina Syed Akil said the proposed degazettement showed that the government was not interested in preserving the natural environment and was driven by an obsession to develop any piece of land that was commercially viable.

“Other groups and stakeholders have spoken out against this move and their reasons are very clear.

“What is their (authorities) motive in approving such a development at the expense of our natural environment?”

“If the government is sincere, they should engage all stakeholders and NGOs instead of merely calling for a public hearing,” she said in a statement.



The adventure park at Taman Rimba Bukit Lagong managed by MPS draws its fair share of outdoor enthusiasts. — Filepic

FRIM objects to proposed development

THE Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) is also voicing out against the proposed degazettement and development at the Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve in Gombak.

Its official response was sent to the Selangor State Forestry Department yesterday.

“We have been contacted by the media and civil society since Nov 23 to make our stand on this issue. Some of our visitors are accusing FRIM of being involved in the proposed degazettement.

“Some even thought that our decision to close off our Rover Track in 2016 was to make way for this,” FRIM director-general Datuk Dr Abd Latif Mohmod said.

He said the proposed area for degazettement was located outside FRIM’s jurisdiction, some 3.5km from the research institute’s campus perimeters.

“Those living around the proposed area, who feel unhappy with the degazettement should promptly send their objections officially to the state forestry department and not direct their frustration and anger towards FRIM,” he said in a statement.

Abd Latif added that FRIM appreciated the public outcry over this issue as it reflected an increasing level of awareness among Malaysians on the importance of forest and environment conservation.

He said he was particularly concerned that the proposed development may affect FRIM’s chances of achieving the Unesco World Heritage Site (WHS) status, apart from opening the floodgate of demands for further degazettement of the forest reserve for development purposes.



The pristine water at Taman Rimba Bukit Lagong is a key attraction at the forest reserve and serves as an important water catchment area. — Filepic

Working towards attaining the Unesco WHS recognition since 2014, FRIM’s nomination for the Tentative List of the Unesco WHS was accepted at the 41st World Heritage Committee Meeting held in Krakow, Poland on July 7, 2017.

The Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve serves as a buffer for the conservation of the 544ha FRIM campus,

which was gazetted under the National Heritage Act 2005 as a Natural Heritage in 2009 and declared as a National Heritage in 2012.

Among others, FRIM is of the view that the Bukit Lagong FR should remain intact because:

- It is an important water catchment supplying water to the surrounding area;
- Development of this area, which is on a steep slope, will increase the risk of landslide and flood occurrences
- The proposed development will also adversely affect the lives of orang asli community living nearby.