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Save Batu Maung mangrove swamp, govt urged

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GEORGE TOWN: The government has been urged to come up with plans to protect a mangrove swamp in Batu Maung that has withstood the test-of time and is now seen as a scientific treasure.

Despite being surrounded by factories and facing urban pollution, the mangrove swamp has beaten the odds and turned itself into a gene bank of 12 species of mangrove trees.

Cut off from the coastline by decades-old reclamation, the trees somehow thrive on nothing more than a 1km-long and 20m-wide canal that allows seawater to reach

them during spring tides.

This 20ha swamp in Batu Maung is now a scientific showcase of global importance because its ecosystem has to be studied to understand how it withstands decades of human pollution.

Mangrove ecologist Dr Foong Swee Yeok, from Universiti Sains Malaysia, said while mangrove swamps were hardy, this patch had gotten "more than its fair share of pollution".

"It survived the pig farms that were numerous in Batu Maung in the 80s before industrialisation.

"There used to be a large market next to it and all its waste water would run through it.

"And now the swamp is in the

heart of an industrial area, and yet it thrives," Foong noted, adding that most mangrove swamps had only a few species and that it was "amazing" this little swamp contained 12 varieties.

She said mangrove trees were so hardy that they could absorb heavy metals and unknown to Penangites, this swamp could have been helping to store such pollutants and kept them from the sea.

"In Hong Kong, mangrove swamps are used as the third filter of sewage before it is released into the sea.

"Even though the sewage is treated, it still contains high levels of nitrates that can give rise to red tides and jellyfish blooms."

Stressing that the Batu Maung swamp is the only one in the country in a heavily urbanised environment, Foong said the authorities had to protect it as a scientific treasure.

About 4ha of the swamp were found cleared late last year and a boat repair yard business was set up on it.

After the trees were cleared, the swamp was filled with illegally dumped construction waste.

State Environment Committee chairman Phee Boon Poh said it was a serious offence to clear the swamp and set up a business without planning permission.

"Although it is federal land, what happens on it requires the approval

of the local authority.

"We realise how valuable the swamp is and we will try every way we can to make sure it is conserved," he said.

The land is owned by the Lands and Mines Office under the guardianship of the Fisheries Department.

State Fisheries Department director Noraisyah Abu Bakar said several departments, including the Forestry Department, Forest Research Institute Malaysia and Lands and Mines Office, and other state authorities recently met to discuss how to best use the swamp to serve the public.

Noraisyah said her department valued mangrove swamps as breeding grounds for marine fishes.