Unit Komunikasi Korporat

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No harvest yet but already thorny



With the growing appetite for top-notch durian varieties, an orchard of Musang King trees is all about the scent of money. But such a project taking shape in a forest reserve in Kedah smells anything but sweet to villagers in the area. They complain of muddy water, a scarred landscape and a drop in income. **> See page 4 for reports by IMRAN HILMY**

Starpic by ZAINUDIN AHAD

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SURAT KHABAR	:	THE STAR			
TARIKH	:	12/12/2019	MUKA SURAT	:	4
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KLASIFIKASI	:	**PERHATIAN**			

Raising a stink over durian

Villagers in Kedah want plantation project scrapped

TheStar Exclusive

By IMRAN HILMY
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A prickly affair: A view of a vast hill clearing for cultivation along the Baling-Gerik expressway near the Kedah-Perak border. (Below) Malik said terraces were cut along the hillslope.

ALOR SETAR: It's every farmer's dream these days to have a Musang King orchard, given that the sought-after durian variety is sold for at least RM300 a kilogramme in China.

But this pursuit of profits is a prickly issue for others affected by a durian plantation project in the Gunung Inas forest reserve, a popular spot for holidaymakers.

Residents of Kampung Iboi near the Baling-Gerik border claimed that the work on the 500ha of land, the size of 700 football fields, has marred the area's water resources and the environment.

This has prompted the villagers to form a Stop the Musang King Project Task Force. Its chairman Malik Arshad, 56, said Gunung Inas has been a source of fresh water for the villagers for four generations.

"Now, it is tainted with muddy water.

"It's not just villagers from Kampung Iboi who have been affected. Five other villages around the area were affected as well. Our source of fresh water has turned 'red' because of the mud that came from the hill.

"We have been using the fresh water from the hill since the time of our forefathers, but in the blink of an eye, the hill has been cleared for the sake of making money," he added.

Malik said Gunung Inas is a water catchment that should be left untouched as it was supposed to be a permanent forest reserve in Kedah.

Logging activities have been rampant but the area was not destroyed as various lumber trees on the hill had grown back, he said.

But now, he added, the hill has been flattened and the site sprayed with pesticide to make way for the project.

"As residents of this area, we are the ones who will face the consequences and risks of this project," he said.

The Star scouted the area recently and found that a strip of the hillside was being cleared. This could be seen from about 4km away in Jalan Kupang-Gerik.

It is learnt that the land is owned by the Kedah government's investment arm Mentri Besar Inc.

According to villager Zaini Harun, 52, people often visited the Gunung Inas forest reserve to enjoy its waterfall.

"But it has now become muddy," she said.

She added that the influx of holidaymakers, especially during weekends and public holidays, enabled the villagers to earn extra income through the sale of food and beverages.

However, she claimed that the place had been deserted since the clearing work for the project started about two years ago.

Another villager, Mohd Khir Ismail, 56, shared the same anxiety.

"Where can we get fresh water after this? As long as the project continues, we will face an uncertain fate," he said.

Rubber tapper Abdul Rahman Ismail, 47, said he used to go up the hill to collect petai to sell at the market.

"But now, there is no more petai to be collected as the forest has been destroyed," he claimed.

Azmi Ahmad, 50, a villager from Kampung Keda Kemangi, which is about 6km from Kampung Iboi, said the Gunung Inas forest reserve should be protected by the authorities.

"I'm quite baffled as to how the project can be allowed to continue."

He said he would have no objection to the project if the water resources had not been contaminated.

The land for the Musang King orchard was leased to ECK Sdn Bhd about two years ago. The Kedah-based company has been linked to MBI International, the money game operator that has run into legal and financial problems.

A company spokesman dismissed the villagers' allegations, adding that the company has complied with the authorities' requirements.

The villagers, he said, had pipes to channel fresh water to their villages.

"We did our part by following all the regulations that has been imposed on us by the authorities before the commencement of the project," he added.

In a recent press conference, Kedah Forestry Department director Roslan Rani said the durian plantation project would continue as the state government has approved it.

"The planting (of durian trees) will only cover a few per cent of the hill. As for the rest, rainforest trees will be replanted," he said.

He, however, said the planting process must follow procedures laid out by the state Department of Environment (DOE) to prevent any contamination.

"The DOE will monitor the site.

"Even before this, the contractor had to get approval from the DOE before proceeding with the project," he said.

It was learnt that previously, about 5,000ha of the Gunung Inas forest reserve had been approved as a logging compartment since 2005.

This is not the first time that the villagers have complained about environmental damage to the forest reserve.

Last year, *The Star* highlighted their concerns about suspected illegal logging activities.

Watch the video
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