KEMENTERIAN TENAGA DAN SUMBER ASLI

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Your opinion

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Wildlife law gets more bite

THE Wildlife Conservation Society Malaysia Program (WCS Malaysia) is heartened by the passing of the Wildlife Conservation (Amendment) Bill 2021 in the Dewan Rakyat on Oct 26, "New law passed with heftier punishments to protect endangered wildlife" (*The Star*, Oct 26; online at https://bit.ly/3mfi8az).

Some of the notable amendments include an increase in fines of up to RM1mil for certain offences, and an increase in jail terms of up to 15 years for others.

WCS Malaysia commends the Energy and Natural Resources Ministry and Department of Wildlife and National Parks for spearheading the passing of this Bill, and looks forward to it being formally gazetted to further deter poachers from carrying out their illegal activities.

In the past two years, the government has initiated a couple of major initiatives to curb poaching and wildlife crime. One of the most significant initiatives for on-the-ground protection of wildlife is the establishment of the Biodiversity Protection and Patrolling Programme, which mobilises hundreds of patrollers comprising veteran army personnel and Orang Asli.

But this programme, in which environmental NGOs are also actively participating, needs to be sustainable over the long term with permanent hired positions to not only ensure consistent and sufficient boots on the ground but also as a means of sustained livelihood and empowerment for the Orang Asli as stewards of conservation.

Another notable initiative is Operasi Bersepadu Khazanah (OBK), which is led by the Royal Malaysia Police and Department of Wildlife and National Parks with participation of other enforcement agencies and environmental NGOs. Earlier this year, OBK won international recognition as one of the winners of the 2020 Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards for its role in the arrest of 87 wildlife offenders, destruction of 460 wire snares and total seizure valued at RM2.7mil.

WCS Malaysia hopes the Royal Malaysia Police would establish a Wildlife Crime Unit soon to further strengthen these efforts, as police personnel are better equipped and trained to undertake intelligence gathering on wildlife poaching and trade syndicates.

No less significant is the announcement by the Energy and Natural Resources Minister Datuk Seri Takiyuddin Hassan about the formation of a National Conservation Task Force (MyTTF) that would be chaired by the Prime Minister. This is exactly what environmental NGOs in Malaysia have been advocating for in the past decade. It also comes at a critical time when preliminary results from Malaysia's first National Tiger Survey show there are fewer than 200 Malayan tigers in the wild now.

The formation of a Tiger Working Group (MyTWG) at state level was also announced, which is very much welcomed as land is a state issue and the fight to save tigers involve interstate cooperation to stop the loss of the animal's habitat, among others.

Ultimately, how MyTTF and MyTWG structure themselves and work together will be crucial in the implementation of government policies favourable for tiger conservation.

We must pull out all the stops to prevent the symbol of our nation from going extinct. Through the various government-led initiatives rolled out over the past two years and these recent announcements, Malaysia seems to be headed in the right direction in making a strong stand against wildlife poaching and illegal wildlife trade.

There is hope, but time is of the essence.

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