

VII. THE URGENT NEED OF PERMANENT FOREST RESERVES IN MALAYA

May Malaysians realize what is at stake and make a joint national effort to agree on conservation of Larut, paradise of Malaysian biocoenosis.

In the Editorial it is already stressed that the rapid disappearance of forest reserves, especially in the Malayan lowland, is an ugly feature in the development of Malaysia. Replacement of unique biocoenosis by oil palm, rubber, and other crops or agricultural land means destruction with finality. There is no doubt that future generations will deplore this and at the same time blame us for lack of foresight.

Forestry services, though well aware of this urgent problem, have not the final say in the destination of land. But it is of great interest to hear what they say. Therefore the Editorial of the Malayan Forester of October 1967 (editor Mr. S.T. Mok) is reproduced here, followed by some quotations from an article by Mr. F.S.P. Ng, in the same journal.

Editorial

The lowland forests which not long ago dominated the scenery of West Malaysia, are fast disappearing. Large areas are managed by the Forest Department as Forest Reserves but even larger areas are being cleared or scheduled to be cleared for agriculture. Within the Forest Reserves themselves, the forests are systematically logged to remove all marketable trees and then managed for the continuous production of further crops of timber - a task which involves (as any grower of crops, whether rubber, timber or rice, knows) encouragement of what one wishes to grow and the suppression of what one regards as weeds; in this case unmarketable trees are regarded as weeds and are systematically poisoned while climbers are cut because they hinder the growth of selected trees. These and various other operations designed to improve the economic value of Forest Reserves mean that the original natural forests are steadily being altered until they become to a greater or lesser extent, man-made, unless special efforts are made to maintain selected areas in their original condition.

The Forest Department recognised this thirty years ago when in January 1938, the then Conservator of Research proposed that within each Forest Reserve, a small area of virgin forest be conserved. In 1949, the State Forest Officers Conference finally agreed to the conservation of such areas, to be known as Virgin Jungle Reserves (VJR).

The formation of a VJR in each Forest Reserve is based on the sound scientific principle that for every experiment, there should be a control against which the results of the experiment may be compared. In this case, the manipulation of a Forest Reserve for the continuous production of timber is a huge experiment. For all the labour and expense of managing a forest crop there is no certainty that the resulting man-directed forest will be in any way more productive than the original forest as nature made it. In order to assess the effectiveness of the techniques used, it is necessary to have within the same Forest Reserve, a plot of original forest against which the treated areas may be later compared, hence the value of VJRs to forestry.

In addition, the formation of VJRs throughout the country ensures that representative areas of forest will be conserved for study by botanists, zoologists and other students of natural science. Suitably sited VJRs also become a national heritage - plots of original wilderness to which future generations can return for recreation. It is a measure of the Department's success that the best stands of accessible virgin forest within fifty miles of Kuala Lumpur suitable for demonstration to University students, natural scientists and trainee-foresters are in the few pockets of VJRs established since 1949 in Selangor.

Unfortunately a VJR owes its existence purely to a Departmental arrangement; where a Forest Reserve is excised, a VJR situated in it is automatically lost, as happened last year when part of the Trolak Forest Reserve in Perak was excised for an oil palm scheme.

With the future of many lowland Forest Reserves now hanging in the balance because of the national emphasis on agricultural development, the future of VJRs must be viewed with concern. It is probable that within the next few decades, forestry will have to vacate the lowlands and all lowland VJRs will consequently be lost together with their unique flora and fauna.

The loss may not be fully felt now when men are busily carving out new farms, villages and towns from the forest to provide a better life for themselves but having attained this first goal, where are they to go in order to escape their teeming cities, noisy traffic and polluted air? Back to the wilderness as nature made it, for recreation and inspiration, provided that in their first enthusiasm for felling the forests, they had the good sense to conserve something for the future.

The time has come for us to consider what areas should be permanently conserved and how best to conserve them. Uncoordinated efforts by individual Departments will no longer suffice. Forestry should join with other interested bodies such

as the Game Department, Agriculture Department, the University, and the Malayan Nature Society in order to jointly propose the establishment of more National Parks for West Malaysia. The Taman Negara, shared by Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan is not enough and it is our opinion that the large states of Johore and Perak should be served by sizeable parks too. In addition smaller areas of limestone, peat swamp and other unique habitats should be conserved throughout the Peninsula so that even should most of the lowlands be cleared there will be representative areas of original forest left. The time to plan is now, not when most of the forests have disappeared. It is still possible to select areas which are really worth preserving and of which the nation can be truly proud; areas with the best scenery, the most interesting plants and most unique animals. Five years from now, it will be too late. Malaysia has a reputation for far-sighted development planning. It is to be hoped that the planners will keep in mind the need to plan not only for the basic necessities of life for Malaysia's growing population but also for outdoor recreation, for the preservation of natural beauty and for the future development of natural science in this country.

An opportunity to put forward the cause of conservation has now arisen with the formation of a Malaysian National Organising Committee for the International Biological Programme last year, one of whose projects will be to co-ordinate the efforts of all interested parties in proposing to Government suitable areas for conservation. The Forest Department, with its history of involvement in such matters has been called upon to join in formulating these proposals, and it is to be hoped that officers of the Department with their knowledge of forest areas, will make their experience freely available to the organisers of the project

In the foregoing paper is stressed that destruction of a biocoenosis includes the wiping out of rare trees, such as Dactylocladus, which was just discovered to occur in Malaya. It wipes out the fauna as well.

The botanical richness of these forests is never-ending so to say, because by the more intense botanical exploration now going on, more rarities and novelties are found than ever anticipated, even in former classical sites. I remind of Trigonobalanus in the hills, and of Allantospermum, about which Mr. F.S.P. Ng wrote an article in the Malayan Forester 31 (1968) 165-169. This unique new tree genus of disputed affinity - some hold it in Simaroubaceae, others allied to Linaeaceae - has been located for the first time in Malaysian Borneo only a decade ago (described in 1965), and has now also been detected in Malaya proper, viz. in Bubu Forest Reserve, one of the very few easily accessible reserves of primary lowland

forest on the westcoast. This reserve falls almost completely in the area known to and made famous by several generations of botanists as "Larut". Mr. Ng says that Mr. Wong has made a strong plea for the conservation of Bubu F. R. in 1966, based on a consideration of its unique location as a refuge for wild animals, accessibility, floristic variety, and natural beauty. Whereas Penang, Malacca, and Singapore have lost almost all their natural, and in each case primary vegetation, Larut alone has escaped such extensive devastation. But, Mr. Ng continues, "this was due to a combination of fortuitous circumstances which no longer operate. The declaration of the whole area round G. Bubu as forest reserve placed it effectively under the protection of the Forest Department at a time when most of the forest exploration activities in the district were concentrated on mangrove areas to the west. Thus Bubu F. R. was until recently kept, quite literally, in reserve, while the mangroves came under the full pressure of economic exploitation. The situation has changed drastically during the past few years. Logging activities are making deep inroads into the area. Hence the last remaining tract of forest in the west coast of Malaya that can boast of any long association with the development of biological science is being subjected to the chain saw and the bulldozer."

"The question must be asked, do scientific and recreational considerations carry no weight when balanced against the power of the dollars that timber can fetch today? Surely the nation as a whole can afford to conserve more selected virgin forest areas in perpetuity as national parks or nature reserves in addition to the Taman Negara. But in the absence of overall policy and direction from the centre with regard to conservation, battles are being lost at the local level. As each district or state forest office submits to mounting local pressures for land and logs, the virgin forest of the whole country will systematically vanish. It must be realised that on the local level, forests are only seen as an immediate source of timber revenue or fertile soil to be grabbed by whatever means available. Conservation? That is a 'sacrifice' for the next district or the next state or the Central Government to consider. Thus, by default, the nation as a whole will suddenly realise in the not too distant future, that much that had been worth conserving will have been irrevocably lost."

C.G.G.J. van Steenis.