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WWF: State's peat forests need our help

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Maludam National Park is known for its peat swamp forest. — Photos courtesy of WWF-Malaysia

KUCHING: Sarawak's remaining peat swamp forests must be conserved to ensure that their unique ecosystem, species and genetic diversity are preserved, says WWF-Malaysia.

About 1.7 million hectares of the country's peatlands are found in Sarawak but only about 62,000 hectares are protected, comprising less than 5% of the existing protected areas in the state.

At present, only the Maludam, Loagan Bunut, Sedilu and Ulu Sebuyau national parks contain peat swamp forests. However, these areas are surrounded by oil palm plantations, WWF-Malaysia Sarawak programme leader Dr Jason Hon said.

He said peat swamp forests with conservation importance can also be found in Simunjan, Sebauh and the Rajang delta and should be given better protection from land conversion, he said at the recent International Peat Congress 2016 in Kuching.

Hon presented a paper titled “Not Wastelands: Let’s Manage Our Peat Swamps Properly Through Systematic Conservation Planning Approach” at the congress. It was co-written by Associate Prof Jayasilan Mohd-Azlan from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and WWF-Malaysia’s Stephanie Alau Apui and Belinda Lip.

Hon said the biodiversity of peat swamp forests should not be underestimated.

As such, resources and attention should be focused on these forests in the state before more are turned into agriculture land, particularly for oil palm.+



The red-banded langur, of which about 300 remaining individuals are found in the Maludam National Park.

“Peat swamp forests are home to some of Borneo’s rarest flora and fauna and play very important roles in the ecosystem,” he said.

“These forests contain over 240 plant species including endemics.

“Some of the most unique fauna species occur in peat swamp forests, such as the red-banded langur with about 300 remaining individuals found in Maludam National Park, the Bornean endemic proboscis monkey and the critically endangered orang utan.

“The only sightings of Storm’s stork and masked finfoot in Sarawak were in peat swamp forests. In Sarawak, the only known breeding colony of the Oriental darter and little cormorant was once recorded in Loagan Bunut,” he added.

Hon said the state government should re-look its current agriculture policy as a step to protect the remaining peat swamp forests.

He also said the state government needed to halt large-scale conversion of intact peat swamp forests, especially those next to protected areas and containing species of conservation importance, into other land uses such as oil palm plantations.

“Policy makers and land use planners should adopt systematic conservation planning (SCP) to help in decision-making for the conservation of peat swamp forests in Sarawak and to guide development planning,” he said.



Peat swamp forests are not wastelands as they are rich in biodiversity.

“If SCP is used properly, conservation efforts can be optimised to include the unique and important peat swamp ecosystems of Sarawak as one of the conservation targets that warrant our utmost attention now.”

He added that other measures to prevent further biodiversity loss of peat swamp forests could be introduced and implemented through SCP.