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PRESS STATEMENT

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ULU MUDA: 74.3% OF “GAZETTED” FORESTS ARE NOT PROPERLY PROTECTED

- **106,418 hectares of rainforests in Ulu Muda are gazetted as “permanent reserve forests”. However, only 15.3% has been classified as “water catchment forests” while 10.4% has been classified as “state forest parks”.**

PENANG, Friday, 15.11.2019: Ulu Muda is the most important water catchment area in the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER). However, according to a recent disclosure, only 15.3% of its rainforests have been gazetted as “water catchment forests” under the National Forestry Act 1984 (NFA 1984).

On 4.11.2019, Penang Chief Minister and Tanjong MP YAB Tuan Chow Kon Yeow asked in Parliament if Ulu Muda had been fully gazetted, in view of its importance to water supply in the NCER.

In its reply on the same day, the Ministry of Water, Land and Natural Resources (KATS) stated that the Kedah State Government had gazetted 106,418 hectares (ha) of the Ulu Muda forests as “permanent reserve forests”, or PRFs, since 24.9.1932.

KATS also stated that on 10.5.2018, the Kedah State Forestry Department classified 16,299 ha of the PRFs (15.3% of 106,418 ha) as “water catchment forests” and 11,118 hectares (10.4% of 106,418 ha) as “state forest parks”.

However, the classification of the remaining 79,001 ha (74.3% of 106,418 ha) of rainforests in Ulu Muda was not revealed.

The 4.11.2019 parliamentary reply raises the following concerns:

1. Kedah had reportedly gazetted Ulu Muda forests as PRFs since 1932. However, this gazette did not stop logging in Ulu Muda until 2018.

It should be noted that Section 10(1)(a) of the NFA 1984 allows for the classification of a PRF as a “timber production forest under sustained yield”.

On 4.9.2018, KATS publicly thanked the Kedah State Government for banning logging in Ulu Muda. However, on 21.4.2019, *The Star* published an exposé showing that 700 ha of rainforests had been logged at Bukit Keramat, revealing a bare hill near the Ahning Dam.

Evidently, gazetting forests as PRFs under the NFA 1984 does not protect water catchment areas from logging, unless these areas are specifically classified as “water catchment forests”.

2. According to the website of the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (MADA), the Muda Dam has a “large catchment area of 984 sq. km”. This is a dam engineering specification.

984 sq. km is equivalent to 98,400 ha. As such, it does not make sense to classify only 16,299 ha of Ulu Muda as “water catchment forests”.

3. According to the official WWF-Malaysia website: “The 160,000-hectare Ulu Muda forest in the State of Kedah, through its function as a water catchment area for the Muda, Pedu and Ahning dams, provides an invaluable environmental service to northern Peninsular Malaysia.”

This “160,000 ha” was also quoted by Friends of Ulu Muda II (FoUM II), a coalition of 19 NGOs.

Apparently, to WWF-Malaysia and FoUM II, “Ulu Muda” refers to the “Greater Ulu Muda Forest Complex”, encompassing 160,000 ha of rainforests; and not 106,418 hectares of forests gazetted by Kedah as PRFs in 1932.

Moreover, the Muda Dam and Pedu Dam were commissioned in 1969. The Ahning Dam was commissioned in 1989. As such, the water catchment areas for these 3 dams were specified after 1932.

4. 160,000 ha of rainforests in Ulu Muda “catch” 70% of Perlis’ raw water, 96% of Kedah’s raw water and more than 80% of Penang’s raw water.
Any reduction in the “size of Ulu Muda” will inevitably affect the volume of raw water available to Perlis, Kedah and Penang.
5. A threat to Ulu Muda is a threat to the NCER because it will affect water supply in 3 NCER states.

About 4.2 million Malaysians live in Perlis, Kedah and Penang. In 2018, Perlis, Kedah and Penang accounted for a total of RM150 billion in GDP contributions (according to estimates published by the Department of Statistics, Malaysia).

6. Kedah must be fairly compensated as the custodian of a “NCER water catchment area” in order for Ulu Muda to be conserved sustainably. Without fair compensation, Kedah will perpetually be tempted to open Ulu Muda to exploitation for economic gain.
7. A sincere commitment to “Save Ulu Muda” must be backed by water-tight legislations that clearly spell out the legal terms, conditions and timespan.

The 4.9.2018 public announcement, stating that “logging has been banned in Ulu Muda”, is encouraging. However, if it is not legally binding, it will not pass the test of time.

As it stands, Ulu Muda is not saved yet. The Federal Government should consider the correct facts and figures before making sound decisions to conserve and protect Ulu Muda properly and sustainably, as a “NCER water catchment area”.

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