

# NST Leader: Danger on the hill

August 24, 2020 @ 12:05am



The Fraser's Hill's narrative, like those that went before, seems to tell us that the environment is only of interest to the naturalists and the media. - NSTP/FARIZUL HAFIZ AWANG

---

OUR hills have been going downhill for the longest time. Fraser's Hill is but the latest. We want to go huge there — like building a 15-storey resort and spa — but we miss the big picture.

Like the environment and all the life forms it supports. Humankind often misses the forest for the trees. The Fraser's Hill's narrative, like those that went before, seems to tell us that the environment is only of interest to the naturalists and the media.

Most others who matter — politicians, policymakers, regulators and the ilk — stay at a safe distance. Until all hell breaks loose, that is. Little wonder politician-columnist Shahril Hamdan, writing an opinion piece in the New Straits Times on Saturday, had this to say: "Malaysia faces a worrying future".

ADVERTISING

True, he may not have had Fraser's Hill in mind, but he certainly had big issues in mind. What is happening on the hill there is a big issue. We debate nothing.

Well, close to nothing. What's worse, we don't seem to agonise over issues of import. Apathy rules, and we hope it is okay. Well, it is not okay.

Here is why. Consider Fraser's Hill. And all 83,000ha of it. It is one big forest complex of flora and fauna. From the limited knowledge we have of it, we know Fraser's Hill hosts 36 flora species endemic to the area. Human activities have already made 12 of them extinct. It is also home to 52 mammals, 275

birds, 27 reptiles and 26 amphibians.

WWF Malaysia is on record as having spotted between 33 and 35 species of mammals. Fraser's Hill is also a major catchment area. Disturb this, and the flora and fauna will soon disappear. And with them, we.

This may read like an alarmist view. Every end reads "alarmist" before it happens. Haven't the alarm bells rung by the naturalists and the media to warn of the dangers to Genting Highlands and Cameron Highlands

turned real? And repeatedly, too?

This should be warning enough for developers. Developments in sensitive areas need a compassionate approach. Compassionate to all living forms, not just to human lives. Being technical about the law i.e. about the need for the Environmental Impact Assessment or the Social Impact Assessment may keep developers out of the court of law, but not in the court of public opinion. The latter ultimately issues the developer the licence to operate.

The authorities at the state and national levels, too, need to begin seeing the big picture. One place to start is to include sustainable development principles in the rules and regulations that govern such developments, says Associate Professor Dr Maizatun Mustafa of the Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyah of Laws, International Islamic University Malaysia.

Regulations that say little to nothing on public access to information and justice must give way to ones that do. "Public wellbeing must course through the veins of the regulations," says Maizatun. On record,

Malaysia has been on the sustainable development journey since the 1970s but not much of this is reflected in our regulations dealing with zoning or local plans. Or our environmental laws.

Laws may march slowly but those who bring them into being or those who enforce them must be farsighted.

They can only be so sighted if they begin to see the big picture.