

# Stopping Sabah's forest loss: Dept

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Kota Kinabalu: The Director, Lands and Surveys has allowed the Forestry Department to earmark unalienated forested state lands, particularly in the interior, to be set aside for forest reserves, said Chief Conservator of Forests Datuk Sam Mannan (pic).

He said in a statement that this may be in the hundreds of thousands of hectares and mostly in the South Western Heart of Borneo (HOB) zone in rugged country.

Sabah is unlikely to lose any more forest cover, he said, and that based on recent assessments, the forest cover area of Sabah is about 58-59 per cent, as against over 90 per cent in the early 1970s.

This loss of forest cover, he said, is acknowledged as due to development for agriculture and land use policies.

However, he assured that this loss in designated areas, of planned deforestation, is expected to continue to decelerate.

Whatever the case, he said lands set aside for conservation and Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) should not go below the threshold of 50 per cent or more, lest it leads to the tipping point.

"Therefore, it is imperative that this policy of maintaining at least 50 per cent forest cover and of the right quality, be set in Krypton quality stone," he said.

He was responding to a report from WWF Malaysia and WWF Indonesia claiming that Borneo was in danger of losing its major ecosystems and the valuable eco-services.

Based on the report, the original 74 million ha of overall forest cover had declined to 55 per cent in 2015 and within the forested areas, fragmentation is widespread with deforestation on the rise. Under a business-as-usual scenario, by 2020, Borneo could lose 75 per cent of its forest.

Mannan said latest WWF report (2016) on the state of Borneo's forests is a wakeup call for all.

"Nevertheless, we hope that Sabah, through its conservation agenda, implemented in earnest since 13 or so years ago, can be seen apart as the contrarian – we are different.

"To secure the best forests, the TPA (totally protected areas) of some 1.9 million ha.

(26 per cent of the landmass) is a starter, which is confidently expected to reach the target of 2.2. million hectares of TPAs (30 per cent), by 2025 at the latest.

He said the vigorous forest restoration works, emphasizing, natural systems (NFM) and forest tending, is also one of the biggest such programmes on Dipterocarp forests in South East Asia.

However, he admitted that due to socio-economic reasons, legacy issues and to clean sweep decades of problems kept under the carpet and unattended for so long, the department has to recover some 75,000ha of natural forests to reach the mark of existing forestland use area again that must be maintained and not eroded.

"The policy must also be able to withstand the possibility of whirlwinds that can come and go from time to time as outrageous fortunes hit us, through credible output, an institutionalized management, wide stakeholder participation, independent certification of good work and consistency in core policies.

"In our dealings with the best scientific minds and organizations and civil society, globally, including the WWF, The Carnegie Foundation, Royal Society, Leap and so on, we are confident that Sabah's forests, in its greatest splendor, are bouncing back with a vengeance.

"We just have to do more of the same that works: protect, plant up, maintain, gazette and put your money where your mouth is," said Mannan.



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