

Climate change a settled fact: Top forester

DE 8.10.2017 P

Kan Yaw Chong

VIRTUALLY no climate change speakers can avoid being dragged into claims that global warming is a hoax or alleged cheat masqueraded as truth.

One serious charge likened it to a "Soviet-style trial in which the facts are pre-determined, and ideological purity trumps technical and scientific rigor", uttered by Republican Senator, James Inhofe in 2003.

But as far as eminent Malaysian forester, Tan Sri Dato Seri Dr Salleh bin Mohd Nor, is concerned, climate change is a settled fact.

So after his Series 8th Kinabalu lecture entitled "Forestry in Global Climate Change" to a packed student body at the UMS Recital Hall on Oct 4, *Daily Express* asked:

"Is climate change a hoax, because if the alleged hoax and scientific conspiracy theories were true, then the world need not worry about transforming the energy industry, nor improve forestry?"

"My answer is very simple - not true," he said. Meaning, the hoax claim is itself a hoax!

"People are not looking at the facts of the case," Salleh asserted. So what are the facts of the case?

"The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has done extensive research to show that it is happening but certain parties don't agree.

"If you want to go on that band wagon and say it's not true and out to put the ice in, then that's your right and privilege but if it does happen later, the government will be blamed," Salleh said.

But what are the facts he can enumerate, personally speaking?

"As I have mentioned, temperatures are changing. Day time peak temperatures are very high as never happened before and that has been recorded in countries that never happened before."

"Secondly, the intensity and frequency of rains is very heavy and very often and unpredictable.

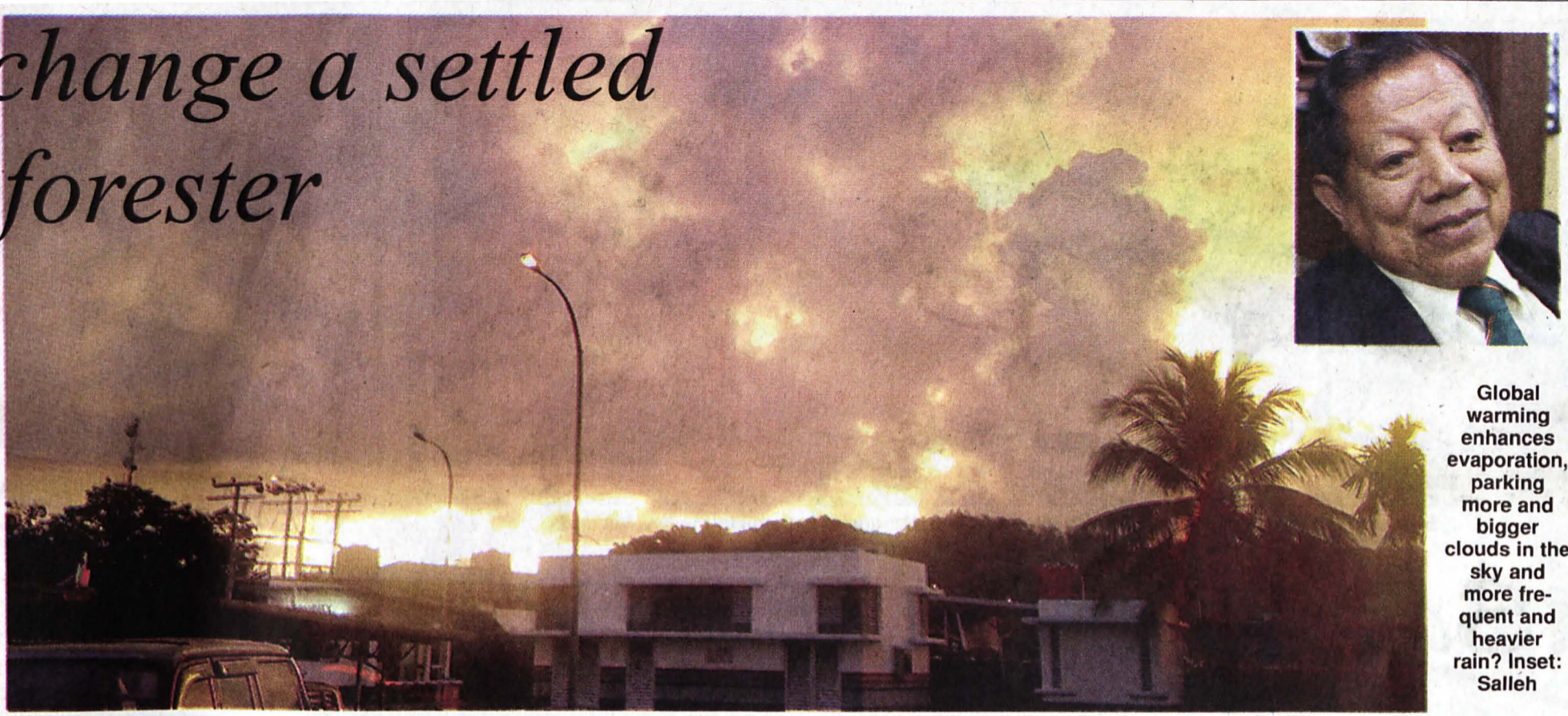
"In the past, we knew monsoons happen at certain times of the year but now it happens all the time."

Better to err on the side of caution

So, to those who are infected with a fog of doubt around climate change by serious sounding hoax and conspiracy theories, Salleh said it's still better "to err on the side of caution".

Though not citing it directly, Salleh alluded to the wisdom of the Boy Scouts' motto - "Be Prepared" - always in a state of readiness in mind and body to face any eventualities, having thought it out before they occur, knowing the right thing to do at the right time and particularly be willing to do it.

He said: "Don't assume things and as far as climate change is concerned, if we



Global warming enhances evaporation, parking more and bigger clouds in the sky and more frequent and heavier rain? Inset: Salleh



Salleh in a group photo with UMS Board of Governors and forestry professors.

wait for full proof as in physics, it'll too late if the full proof does happen.

"So we got to prepare ourselves because even if it were a hoax, at least we have done something and if we don't prepare ourselves, then who is to blame?"

"Right now, we have the use of petroleum energy which emit greenhouse gases, they must have an impact but which is difficult to measure in terms of numbers and so we as responsible people must think about the worst case scenario so that if it does happen later on, we are all prepared for it."

However, the global nature of climate change means only a collective response will work.

"There is nothing you and I alone can solve because it's not a single problem, it's a global problem."

Firm belief in forests

Back to the topic of his lecture - Forestry in Global Climate Change - now that global warming is a settled fact as far as Salleh is concerned, doesn't that mean forests of the world have lost their ability to regulate or control the average temperature of the world at its desired level?

"Well, forests are just one of the elements of it. They absorb 40pc of the atmospheric carbon, the ocean also absorb 30pc, a lot of carbon, not just forests doing it. Can forestry solve the problem? No, not alone. There must be a holistic approach to a global problem - everything working together."



Salleh speaking to a packed hall of UMS students on Oct 4.

"To my mind, forestry can play its role to absorb carbon and mitigate against climate change. That's my firm belief and forestry is not just about trees.

"But looking after urban tress, managing them to grow well to absorb as much carbon as possible is part of part of that relationship," Salleh said.

Underscoring the need for Sabahans and Malaysians to show an active interest in the climate change issue, Salleh cited how temperature changes affect the success of the most loved durian in the production of the king of fruits!

The Durian and Climate Change

"The durian has a lot of fruits which

depend on temperature," he noted.

"Whether the bud becomes a leaf bud or a fruit bud depends on the diurnal temperature, ie, the difference between the highest day time peak temperature and lowest temperature at night which must be a minimum of 6 degrees Centigrade, then only it becomes a fruit bud or flower bud. If not, it becomes a leaf bud so there is science in all of this and unfortunately we don't understand all that yet. It is still a theoretical concept not proven by science yet, so we have to learn and do research to understand it," Salleh pointed out.

So what if global warming runs out of control and greatly reduce Malaysia as a

durian producing country? Fruit for thought!

So, *Daily Express* asked: What should the people Sabah do, because this kind of thing is normally off their radar?

"Exactly, because it is a global problem, you and myself cannot affect global warming, but we must collectively do it."

"For example, we must reduce the use of greenhouse gas, switch off electricity when we are not using it, make sure our cars run efficiently so that they don't give out smog, reduce the use of water, so all these little bits done collectively add up. We do it, then hopefully the cumulative effect is quite significant."

An insurmountable 'Tragedy of the Commons'?

Because climate change is a proverbial 'Tragedy of the Commons' and a global scale challenge, does Salleh feel that climate change is insurmountable?

"No, I don't think so," he returned an optimistic note. What accounts for his optimism?

"Because it is man-made, that is being recognised, plus science is improving. So we have the sciences to support us, we have the technology to support it. For example, the use of biodegradable products, the technology is there. So it's a matter of us enforcing it and doing it."

Time for new ethical dimension

But any action on climate change runs into serious ethical issue - a matter of basic human conduct.

The problem is while weather seems to be going haywire all over the place, the world doesn't seem to be able to lever traditional ethics for rescue because conventional ethics had been all about rules governing human to human conduct.

There's no such thing like 'love thy rivers as thyself' edict, for example.

On this dimension of climate change, Salleh bored down on one instance of ethical collapse that everyone is familiar with.

"Corruption is dangerous," he told the Recital Hall packed to the hilt with UMS students.

Fortunately, he learnt to shun it in life and took that lesson on ethics back to the point of origin - his lorry driver father who drummed this message into his head hard and early when he was a little boy: "Salleh, don't take one sen if the money does not belong to you!"

So he said he grew up believing in the primacy of honesty and integrity that is going to be needed to take the scourge out of the system to give climate a new hope for the better.

Conflict of interest is the fastest way to destroy the forest, such as letting loggers run it because they'll just go so close to the tree and look at the money but miss the forest completely.

To forests with love

Forests should be managed by people who love them. He said went into forestry because he loved the forest.

"The longest time I stayed inside the forest was two months," he noted.

When he dated his wife, he had to tell her what he did for a living: "I am a forester," and came back the incredulous quip: "Huh, *orang hutan*?" (Laughters)

So universities like the UMS should have a School of Forestry filled with quality staff and attract the best students who pick it as their "first choice," he said, to ensure future stewardship of forests get into the hands of the quality care and management that they deserve to protect their value.

"Ethics is important because in the end it's the human race that does it," Salleh explained.

"And ethical thing is equivalent to the mind of the people. You must have the ethical approach to things, not just the hard science, the social sciences are important - how people behave, how people relate to each other, how people respect each other, those are all ethical issues," Salleh noted.

"Forestry had given me a lot of benefits to my life, but as I said, just because you are a forester does not mean you spend whole life in forestry, it doesn't mean you live in the forest, I do a lot of work in the Malaysian Nature Society."



Call to reinstate former School of International Tropical Forestry (left) which was dropped in favour of umbrella Faculty of Science and Natural Resources (right).