

# UMS team's findings challenged

DE 22.3.2014 1

KOTA KINABALU: Sabah Forestry Department Director Datuk Sam Mannan (pic) has rubbished assertions that the State has the highest deforestation rate in the world.



He said the forest cover remains at around 60 per cent with very little mangrove cover loss over the last 50 years – perhaps not more than 10 per cent of the original and only in coastal towns.

Responding to the studies by the winning Youth Eco Challenge team from Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) in the recent Eco-System Development (Seed) Exhibitions and Conference 2014, he said the mangroves were protected through policy measures disallowing large-scale exploitation and usage restricted to limited domestic consumption only.

According to Mannan, there were three glaring assertions in the UMS student studies, namely, 320,000 hectares of mangroves reclaimed for development in 2008, Sabah has the fastest rate of forest loss, (presumably mangrove forests), in the world and mangroves were not accorded protection specifically.

"The Forestry Department regrets that these are 'misfacts' probably reported as such due to misinformation, the lack of information or even sheer ignorance," he said here Friday.

The facts were that about 340,000 hectares of mangroves in Sabah are Forest Reserves. This exceeds 90 per cent of the mangrove forests in Sabah.

"By virtue of the long established export ban on mangroves of any nature (chips, poles, timber, etc) and usage restricted for domestic consumption (piling timber, poles, fishing nets, charcoal and some firewood) only, the harvesting is limited, perhaps not exceeding 500 hectares per year (0.15 per cent of the total reserved forests).

"Local consumption has plunged due to substitutions – e.g. concrete piling increasingly used, negligible firewood production, etc.

"Sabah has Malaysia's largest Ramsar Wetlands area close to 80,000 hectares at coastal Kinabatangan, which is mostly mangroves. This is just one model of conservation measures of world standing and recognition. And as harvesting is limited and trade restrictions (no exports) imposed, the mangrove forests are protected because of market forces. Legal status against exploitation through re-classification to totally protected status (e.g. Class I) is also being planned to cover at least 50 per cent of the mangrove forest reserves," he said.

Mannan said there had been unavoidable loss of mangrove forests in the past to make way for town expansion or industrialisation – e.g. the development of east coast towns such as Lahad Datu, Semporna and Tawau.

However, any 'de-reservation' is compensated by the creation of equal, if not bigger, new Mangrove Forest Reserves, he said, adding that the development of mangrove areas were outside the reserve system and not within forest reserves – e.g. fish ponds, oil palm, etc. There were cases of illegal encroachments in mangrove forest reserves but these were now largely addressed through eviction, prosecution and follow-up rehabilitation (e.g. the

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