

Development ravages Malaysia's 'Little England'

January 8 2014, by M Jegathesan



A worker holds up a snake caught at an organic farm in the Cameron Highlands, Malaysia, on November 20, 2013

On a Malaysian ridge-top, R. Ramakrishnan scans a rugged landscape famed in British colonial times as a fresh-aired slice of England in the tropics, but he sees a paradise lost.

Illegal farms covered in unsightly plastic sheeting stretch into the

distance along the steep slopes of the Cameron Highlands as bulldozers mow down nearby forests.

"Everyone is grabbing land. There is a free-for-all," the local environmental activist said as chainsaws growled.

Perched more than 1,000 metres (3,300 feet) high on Malaysia's central spine, the Cameron Highlands emerged as the country's first tourist destination during early-20th-century British rule.

Known by some as a "Little England", it was beloved by homesick colonials who presided over afternoon tea or a few gin and tonics amid its cool air, lush gardens, and arresting tea-plantation vistas.

Colonial architecture still graces a region that is Malaysia's main domestic source of temperate-zone crops like strawberries and apples and a habitat for flora and fauna including the severely endangered Malayan Tiger.

But rampant farm, condo and hotel development is shattering the area's legendary repose, raising growing concern for its ecological balance, tourist appeal, and even safety as landslide and flood fears grow.

"The pain inflicted on Mother Nature is terrible. We are losing the highlands," said Ramakrishnan, popping peanuts into his mouth as he drove past felled trees and garbage-strewn streams that run brown with silt from erosion.

Voicing a common local refrain, he blames "greedy and corrupt" officials and farm interests for flouting land laws in the mountainous region of Pahang state, which is governed by Malaysia's graft-plagued ruling coalition.

In the 1920s, British growers began establishing the picturesque tea plantations that hug the undulating terrain like a green quilt.

The area gained a measure of mystique with the unsolved 1967 disappearance of American businessman Jim Thompson.



A new development area in Malaysia's Cameron Highlands, pictured on November 19, 2013

Credited with reviving Thailand's silk industry—his eponymous apparel brand still bears his name—Thompson vanished during a Cameron stroll, sparking rumours of intrigue due to his documented US intelligence links.

Today's problems are a microcosm of a greater national failure to balance development with Malaysia's rich natural environment.

Data published in the US journal Science in November showed Malaysia lost 14.4 percent of its forests from 2000-2012, the world's highest rate.

Critics largely blame the politically-connected timber and oil-palm industries.

The data indicated the Cameron Highlands were a deforestation hotspot.

"There is total disregard for laws," said Gurmit Singh of the sustainability-advocate Centre for Environment, Technology and Development, Malaysia.

"We are killing our land and our forests."

Top Malaysian officials joined a chorus of concern over the Cameron Highlands in October after three people were killed and dozens of homes and vehicles damaged or destroyed when authorities released water from a dam straining amid a severe flashflood.

Illegal land-clearing is widely blamed for exacerbating the flood and the heavy silting behind the dam that has raised questions over its integrity.



A truck passes piles of rubbish in the Cameron Highlands, Malaysia, on November 19, 2013

Ahmad Daud, the state government's district land officer, acknowledged the rampant illegal land-clearing, but denied the allegations of official corruption.

"We have to be realistic. Cameron Highlands needs development," he said.

But visitor arrivals plummeted nearly 42 percent in the first half of 2013 as media coverage of the region's woes intensified. Authorities blame a faster new highway they say reduces overnight stays.

K. Balakrishnan operates a 25-room cottage hotel built in the 1930s and set amid lush gardens of bright flowers. But customers are dwindling, he said, with many voicing disgust with the area's direction.

"After 35 years, I may have to sell my hotel to the big boys," the burly hotelier said over an English breakfast of tea and scones with cream and jam.

Tourism and environment minister G. Palanivel has warned publicly of the impact the Cameron growth pains could have on tourism. But he declined to offer a detailed government response when asked by AFP.

British merchant John Russell founded the BOH tea plantation, one of the area's first, in the 1920s. His grand-daughter Caroline Russell said its yields were declining today, blaming an altering of the delicate local environment by development.

"What is happening now is not sustainable," she said.

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