

Frame the Future Thought Pieces



Can Nature Conservation and Economic Development Go Together?



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The question of how we can balance development with nature conservation and protection is a sensitive one. Both parts are equally important, and the line must be drawn somewhere in the middle to ensure neither are neglected.

The issue is critical and has been drawing global attention since the United Nations convened the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) 30 years ago, better known as the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The Summit resulted in the Agenda 21, a global plan of actions promoting sustainable development with equal emphasis on the economy, social equity, and the environment.

Unfortunately, as is evident from the debates during the recent 26th meeting of the Conference of Parties on Climate Change in Glasgow (COP26), global warming and biodiversity loss, two closely interrelated issues, are still unresolved.

According to the *2019 Global Assessment Report* by The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), one million plant and animal species are under the threat of extinction, and almost 60 percent of ecosystem services — many of those that provide us with oxygen, food, and clean water — have been degraded in the past half-century due to human activities, resulting in dire prospects for not only humans, but for all other forms of life on earth.

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Southeast Asia, which accounts for only 3 percent of the earth's surface, is home to almost 20 percent of the world's biodiversity. In fact, three of its member countries, including Malaysia, are "megadiverse" countries, with among the highest levels of biodiversity in the world.

When Malaysia gained independence in 1957 from British colonial rule, the poverty level was at 47 percent. Today, Malaysia is a middle-income country, with a poverty level of less than 5 percent.

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One of the major economic drivers in Malaysia is the palm oil industry, and the country is now the second leading producer of palm oil in the world. Although deforestation had to occur to make way for palm oil development, efforts are being made by the palm oil industry in Malaysia to become more sustainable.

According to the World Resources Institute, the rate of deforestation in Malaysia has decreased annually over the past four years. One of the keys to this success is the [Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil \(MSP0\)](#) certification scheme, which was nationally mandated in 2019.

The MSP0 – which is not only focused on improving standards of management and promoting sustainable forest management, but also on improving biodiversity, among other things – has been [touted](#) as a model for global sustainability and having the “potential to truly transform supply chains, not only for the palm oil sector, but for all forest-risk commodities.”

The Malaysian government is very conscious of the power of science, technology, and innovation for socio-economic development, and has implemented various national STI policies with strong political commitment.

Last year, the Academy of Sciences Malaysia (ASM) implemented the [10-10 Malaysian Science, Technology, Innovation and Economic \(MySTIE\) Framework](#) to align key socio-economic drivers in the country with drivers of global development in science and technology, such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and bioscience technology, among others.

One area under the framework is [Precision Biodiversity \(PBD\)](#), which aims to apply emerging and advanced technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution to conserve, monitor, and manage biological resources. It is hoped that the PBD can protect and conserve more effectively such resources, and simultaneously deliver socio-economic returns for the country.

It is important to note that natural assets cannot be properly developed without human talent and expertise. In fact, the human asset would be the most sacrosanct of all natural assets, especially in a mega-biodiverse country like Malaysia.

Many of the lagging countries in the world spend less than 1 percent of their GDP on R&D. In contrast, industrialized countries such as Korea, Japan, and Germany invest more than 3 percent of their GDP in R&D and have thriving STI ecosystems. This highlights the importance and the need for capacity building and R&D. In Malaysia, University Technology PETRONAS, which is a private university belonging to a petroleum company, is coming out on top in the [2022 World University Rankings](#) by doing relevant R&D and investing in human resources towards the socio-economic development of the country.

How do we balance development with the conservation and protection of natural assets and biological resources? Among the estimated 8.7 million species that exist on Earth, only about 1.64 million have been discovered by science, and only a fraction of them have been examined for their potential medicinal, industrial, and agricultural value.

It is incumbent upon knowledge generators and researchers to uncover the enormous potential of natural assets for development, and at the same time, highlight the importance of protection and conservation so that we do not lose these priceless resources to extinction.