

Malaysia: Report: Locals, NGOs push back against proposed theme park in Cameron Highlands

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A proposed outdoor ski theme park development worth RM100 million on a 60-acre plot in Cameron Highlands has met resistance from locals as well as NGOs concerned about environmental issues.

In early August, it was reported that Singapore-listed theme park developer Sim Leisure Group intends to develop a theme park named “ESCAPE Cameron Highlands”, which will become the region’s first outdoor ski attraction.

However, environmentalists and locals fear that this new development will only exacerbate the issues of landslides, rapid overdevelopment and deforestation in what has been described as an environmentally sensitive region.

“They (Sim Leisure Group) must be on a fantasy island. To think that they can even conceive of this kind of a project up there.

“The problem in this country is that anything can happen. I call it a crazy project in a very sensitive area,” said Friends of the Earth Malaysia president Meenakshi Raman, as reported by the *Southeast Asia Globe*.

She warned of overdevelopment in Cameron Highlands, which is already a landslide-prone area that averages two major landslides annually.

In late August, landslides after a flood in nearby Gunung Jerai had claimed six lives, while another life was lost in a landslide on Sept 16.

“Cameron Highlands is not immune to (landslides and floods) so any proposals for unwarranted tourism really shouldn’t be allowed.

“We have to focus on strengthening the resilience of ecosystems, particularly highlands, because of how vulnerable they are to climate impacts,” Meenakshi said.

‘European’ attractions may clash with existing ones

Aside from the ski slope, the theme park design will be drawing from the European heritage and divided into five European-style villages – Iberian, British Isle, Balkan, Nordic and Alpine – featuring traditional games from the respective cultures.

Malaysian Nature Society Pahang chairperson Noor Jehan Abu Bakar said the theme park does not fit with the existing attractions in Cameron Highlands which has already made it into a world-class

tourist destination.

“Cameron Highlands has always been sold as a natural and a hilly highland getaway.

“A theme park just does not jive with what Cameron Highlands has always been,” she said.

She also noted that the current infrastructure in the Cameron Highlands is not prepared to accommodate the theme park or the surge of crowds that will come along with it due to the narrow main roads in the area.

“It takes you two hours to get to a place that is 5km away (now).

“If you have another theme park, are you going to build a bigger road? Are you going to build another road?” she asked.

Transforming barren lands into ‘green’ attractions

On the other hand, Sim Leisure Group CEO Sim Choo Kheng said they had carefully considered before choosing the land - a private stretch of land owned by real estate company Hektar Muda Sdn Bhd - for their proposed development.

He also said the planned theme park would be similar to its counterpart in Penang, “ESCAPE Penang”, which transformed a barren piece of state land into an adventure park within a mini “green lung” surrounded by more than 3,000 trees.

“We will restore the current abandoned site into a place where families can enjoy nature-based experiences.

“We will enhance the green footprint within the area by major-scale tree planting and preserving existing environmental conditions,” Sim said, adding that the project will also provide more jobs to the locals.

The development group are also currently working on an environmental impact assessment (EIA). It was also reported that the project has not yet received approval to begin construction.

No consultations with locals

Despite the reassurances from Sim, local resident Dilip Martin said the company has neither directly informed them about the project nor have the local community been approached for their input.

Large development projects normally consult local communities and authorities first, even if the construction occurs on private land, he said.

“We were shocked because we are the locals there, we should know first.

“When a plan is submitted to the council, they will then send a letter to all relevant (stakeholders) to ask for their comments,” said Dilip, who is also the Regional Environmental Awareness Cameron Highlands (Reach) president.

He added that if the development was something that enhanced the natural beauty of the area rather than distracting from it, the locals would have been a lot more supportive of the project.

“If the theme park comes out saying that they want to build the longest walking bridge, I will support them myself. People will love and feel nature.

"I am not saying we don't want development. We need development, but it needs to be sustainable development.

"When people come to Cameron Highlands, they want to feel nature. So why do you want to disturb nature?" Dilip said.

Although it was also announced that the ski park will adopt a 100 percent renewable energy system, including photovoltaic facilities, hydropower and wind turbine, that was not enough to assuage the fears of the locals.

Last month, Cameron Highlands residents initiated an online petition urging the state government and the Department of Environment, among other relevant authorities, to reject the development.

At the time of writing, the [petition](#) has garnered 56,197 signatures, out of the 75,000 needed.

The first phase of the theme park's construction is expected to commence in December this year and is scheduled to complete in 2023.

When contacted by *Malaysiakini*, Tanah Rata assemblyperson Chiong Yoke Kong urged the state and local government to hold an open and transparent public hearing with regard to large-scale development projects so they can collect the opinions from various stakeholders.

"Implementing this initiative will guarantee the rights to information, expression, participation and check and balance of all stakeholders in Cameron Highlands in order to truly ensure sustainable development in Cameron Highlands," Chiong said.

Malaysiakini has contacted Cameron Highlands MP Ramli Md Nor for his comments on this matter and is awaiting his response.

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