# "PROTECT THE PULAI: SAVING THE FORESTS OF FEDERAL HILL"



# Community Conservation: Protecting KL's Last Green Spaces

Look into the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and you'll find a natural wonder unlike any other.

When Delima was thirteen, she'd head there on late afternoons with two of her best friends. "There were no steps or built paths at the time but we knew how to sneak from Bangsar into Federal Hill."

They'd spend hours exploring this tranquil green pocket and its small lanes named after eight Malaysian states. "It's a particularly special memory," Delima tells us, "We'd pretend that we'd reached Negeri Sembilan, Johor, etc., because of all the road names." Since it was close to home, it was one of the few places they were allowed to roam and play freely.

Jump forward a few years, to a morning in 2019, and you'd probably see Eddie running along forest trails there. Reality had hit hard when his doctor informed him that he'd reached a life threatening level of obesity. Eddie then started to run along the trails near his house. Incredibly, he shed 30kg, discovered a love for outdoor fitness, and, today, is making plans to hike Mont Blanc. As he trains for the Alps, he remembers that his journey began on this humble Malaysian hill. In his words, "Federal Hill saved my life."

On paper, Federal Hill can be described as a residential area but it also hides 18 acres of secondary forest. To the community, the verdant hill is an ever-present backdrop in the everyday lives of its neighbours.





### Federal Hill (Bukit Persekutuan) today

Many KLites use the hill to exercise and socialise. Several residents walk every morning and, on weekends, people come to hike the short walking trails. The area attracts folks of every age and background; visitors as diverse as the city that surrounds it.

It's easy to understand why. This lush forest is right smack-bang in the heart of Kuala Lumpur. Its location allows city-dwellers to reconnect to some raw nature without needing to drive out far. Here, anyone can drop their devices and enjoy the fresh air and cooler temperatures under the shady trees.

"I enjoy the quietness and peaceful surroundings," Khatijah tells us, "With the beautiful old colonial houses curtained by greenery." She has lived here since the 70s when the paths were her shortcut home from school, and she now takes walks 3-4 times a week.

Ecologically too, Federal Hill is incredibly special. The hill consists of four permanent streams, regenerated lowland and mixed secondary forest that is scattered along hill slopes and gullies. Stepping onto a forest trail leads you into a new world of flowers, fantastic fungi and spectacular old trees towering overhead.

During the pandemic, many people turned to nature as a place to recharge. Mei discovered these trails in early 2021, and spends most of her lunch breaks doing laps of the Pulai Trail. On her phone is an impressive gallery of photos of the fungi and wildlife she's seen along the way, including shrews, snakes, monitor lizards and friendly neighbourhood pets.

Federal Hill is also a symbol: this hill is one of the last remaining sizable green spaces in the KL city centre. It's a deeply precious space that we, together with the community, want to protect.

## Understanding the threat to Federal Hill

Federal Hill (which belongs to the federal government) was once connected to the Botanical Gardens and Taman Tugu. Its prime location opposite the KL Sentral Commercial District puts it at great risk of being displaced by urban development. Today, the tall metal barriers of a construction site edge ominously closer to the start of the trails. They were not there a year ago.

Sadly, the state of Federal Hill as we know it is precarious. Urban sprawl is threatening the forests, which have no protection in their current zoning as Kawasan Hijau. The loss is heartbreaking to consider. To KLites, losing the hill would rob them, and future generations, of a rare connection to nature from within the city. KL also stands to lose another valuable carbon sink and an integral part of its ecology at a time of global climate emergency.

To the community, the loss is also personal. "It's so precious. They hold many memories for me," Khateja tells us. Another regular, Ben, sums it up in a word: "Devastating. It would be devastating".





#### Efforts to protect the hill

A number of conservation initiatives have been launched in attempts to preserve and protect Federal Hill from these growing threats. The most effective so far has been Urban Community Forest (UCF), which was initiated by the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) and focuses on a particular area of the hill. The four trails it encompasses are some of the last remaining public forested spaces left in Kuala Lumpur: 1. Jungle Fowl 2. Cempedak, 3. Heritage 4. Pulai Trail.

MNS has recorded an incredible range of biodiversity within UCF: 234 species of plants, mammals (10), birds (53), herpetofauna (20), macrofungi. (34) and insect species (23). The area also encloses several historically significant buildings, including 119 heritage government bungalows from the 1950-60 era.

Since 2019, Free Tree Society has taken up a custodian role of the Pulai Trail and helped oversee community maintenance and forest regeneration programmes.

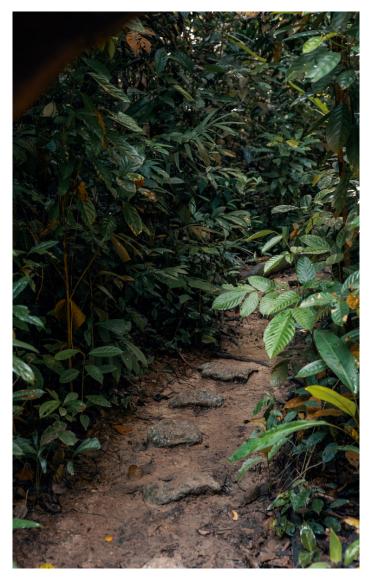
For further reading, download the UCF booklet at: ucfnetworkbukitpersekutuan.wordpress.com

## Pulai Trail: So much more than a trail

The Free Tree Society flagship nursery has been situated at the foot of Federal Hill since 2013. For the past eight years, we've watched this beautiful green space grow more precious.

The Pulai Trail is special for many reasons. It takes its name from the majestic common pulai (Alstonia angustiloba) trees along the trail, with one of its kind marking the trail's entrance. Contrary to the name, these mid-canopy trees are anything but common. There are only a handful of city green spaces where trees of this height can be found.

The Pulai Trail was also recently visited by a senior research officer at FRIM, Dr Ang Lai Hoe, who amazed us with his observations that primary rainforest species are still present here. These forests have existed since before the establishment of Kuala Lumpur, and this makes these fragments of primary forest utterly irreplaceable and deserving of protection.



A visit from Shaq Koyok, a Temuan artist and conservationist, unearthed more discoveries. On this trail are local ingredients and materials that we can find in our homes. Along the way is a cluster of pandanus plants in giant proportions and an impressive patch of rotan vine. Another area is filled with kabong palms that were personally cared for by a local man up until his death.

You can even spot the host vine for the rafflesia flower! The cool, damp surroundings also host a colony of fireflies, visible on evening and night walks. Another recent find is the "COVID-flower" - a peculiar purple flower that has been fondly named by the community because of its spikes (actually Poikilospermum suaveolens!).

There is still so much to learn from the Pulai Trail. Even for what is perceived to be a small, overgrown patch of scrubland, there is a wondrous richness of biodiversity. As a forest in recovery, it showcases the potential of urban forest conservation and rehabilitation. As regeneration progresses and newlyadded native plants mature, they will support wildlife and soothe our desire for nature in an ever-eroding ecosystem. But none of these futures are possible if these forests are lost.





# What can YOU do to help?

It can feel heartbreaking for nature lovers to watch as the last few green spaces we have left disappear. Not many of us are in a position to spend years battling billion dollar developers in court. However, that does not make us powerless.

There are real things we can do as an urban community to nurture the green spaces we have left. If you love nature and want to preserve, protect and restore it as much as our Free Tree team does, here are ways to join us in actively protecting the Pulai Trail:

- Use the Pulai Trail regularly and invite friends and family to also use it.
- Tag #pulaitrail on social media regularly and help us to spread the word.
- If you find out about any threats to the protection of the Pulai Trail, create an online petition and get as many signatures as you can.
- Write to your local council member, Datuk Bandar and Federal Territories Minister and tell them how much you value the trail. You can download templates here.
- Planting trees to help boost biodiversity
- Trail upkeep and maintenance



If you're interested in volunteering or playing a part in conserving this area, Free Tree Society also runs two weekly conservation and trail maintenance activities for the Pulai Trail: "Plant the Pulai" and "Conserve the Pulai."

Groups taking part in these activities will explore the Pulai Trail to learn about urban forest regeneration, help upkeep the trail and plant for biodiversity. Both activities will take 2 hours and are suitable for ages 13 years and upwards.

#### "Plant the Pulai" includes:

- A short talk on urban biodiversity
- A guided walk through the trail, with its history and points of interest highlighted
- Plant a tree per person to help boost biodiversity
- Trail upkeep and maintenance

#### **Conserve the Pulai includes:**

-Trail building, maintenance and upkeep a.k.a a great outdoor workout!

Consider donating towards the cause. Funds will be used for upkeep of the trail and buying additional plants for biodiversity with any surplus channeled towards the consultation of scientists and experts to assist in documenting data on the flora and fauna within the Pulai Trail.

With the support of the community and all who care for the cause, we stand a fighting chance of preserving this beautiful and essential green space for years to come.

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Free Tree Society Kuala Lumpur is an environmental organization producing a range of community projects and events centred around our precious environment.

Our goal is to engage and educate the public on sustainability, uphold the importance of conserving our environment, plant more trees and save our planet.

Find out more at freetreesociety.org