

Caring for our trees

Old titans need maintenance, not the axe

WHILE attention was naturally centred on the plight of victims crushed by the sudden toppling of raintrees in Kuala Lumpur's Jalan Pinang and Jalan Sultan Ismail in thunderstorms last week, can we spare a little thought for the befallen giants? Unless seasoned arborists from Kuala Lumpur City Hall had kept tabs on the raintrees' luxuriant growth over the decades, or maybe even a century, we have little idea of their real age when deciding to end their majestic lives. Thus this leader's obituary of sorts. The complex procedure of carbon dating the trees may establish age. Or, to a lesser degree, through deduction, which is by inferring the year the two roads were first conceived and constructed. Perhaps the National Archives can help by digging up old black-and-white photographs of the era's planting of saplings. Nevertheless, it is believed that the fallen raintrees were of the *Albizia saman* species, which are conspicuously flat-topped titans. They stand erect at 60 metres while their cylindrically dense and umbrella-shaped crown stretches 30 metres across to provide

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a cool shade from the hot afternoon sun. The ignominious toppling of such beautiful trees is shuddering, and it is indeed tragic for anyone killed in the crush. However, dying or dead majestic trees reflect the sign of the times: In 2021, the Taiping Lake Gardens in Perak lost its 136-year-old *Samanea saman*, fondly known as *hujan-hujan* — and

with it, the soul of the town.

As ancient as planet Earth, raintrees have grown widely in Southeast Asia into massive rainforests, where a commanding portion has spread unobtrusively in Taman Negara, although loggers have decimated substantial acreage since time immemorial. The Jalan Pinang and Jalan Sultan Ismail icons, if they didn't sprout from saplings, would have been the precious few that stood for eternity, too defiant to be uprooted in spite of threats from massive urban machinations. While these magnificent raintrees survived the developers' chainsaw, they barely endured the ravages of the 21st century, from tangled roots displaced by concrete blocks to fiercer electric thunderstorms. Typical of the red tape, the tragedy has sparked calls by some people for Kuala Lumpur City Hall to cut down all huge trees within its jurisdiction, which it seemingly obliged. Conservationists are pushing back at this knee-jerk reaction by appealing for sensible tree mitigation measures of pruning, providing foundational reinforcements and ensuring consistent maintenance.

Being pragmatic of the inevitable, the prime minister has instructed City Hall to replace every tree felled with 100 new trees, presumably with hardy and leafy species that can outlive at least this century. With this new tree edict, Kuala Lumpur is emulating Singapore, scrupulous tree planters of "ready-made" poles at every highway, road and street. A prudent consideration: while city planners cut and prune trees as safety measures, the environment must not segue into an absolute concrete jungle. Trees are a precious life force and underlines the caring for greenery which must be prioritised in all town planning.