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Oct 27, 2004

Axe trees illegally? Bigger fine likely

Those who cut down trees marked for conservation may face a fine of up to \$50,000

By Alexis Hooi

A NEW law being considered in Parliament proposes to raise the maximum fine for those who cut down trees marked for conservation from \$10,000 to \$50,000.

The move comes in the wake of a rise last year in the number of protected trees illegally cut down.

A spokesman for the National Development Ministry on Monday said 28 trees were illegally felled last year, up from 17 in 2002. Most of the offenders were contractors and developers, added the spokesman.

She said: 'This is to deter would-be offenders, who would rather pay the current \$10,000 fine for unauthorised felling or cutting of a tree ... than make changes to their design or construction.'

The proposed increase is part of the Parks and Trees Bill, first read in Parliament on Tuesday last week. Under the current Parks and Trees Act, anyone caught cutting down trees more than 1m in girth in a tree conservation area can be fined a maximum of \$10,000. The offender can also be ordered to compensate the National Parks Board .

The National Development Ministry spokesman said the amenity value of trees - based on their age, size and general condition - is considered when compensation values are worked out.

In March last year, DTZ-Debenham Tie Leung Property Management Services was fined \$8,000 for the felling of a 150-year-old hopea sangal in the Changi Tree Conservation Area and ordered to pay the State \$76,035 in compensation.

There are two designated tree conservation areas here - one encompassing the Tanglin-Bukit Timah-Pasir Panjang area and the other at Changi. These areas were chosen in 1991 because of the large number of clusters of mature trees and wooded areas there.



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Experts The Straits Times spoke to welcomed the heavier penalty, although some like biologist N. Sivasothi said the amount could still be inadequate.

Said Mr Sivasothi, a researcher for the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research: 'The fine could still be peanuts for offenders like developers. But I suppose it's a very good thing. Coupled with the compensation, the culprits can end up paying a pretty large sum.'

The vice-president of the Nature Society of Singapore, Dr Shawn Lum, said it was still important for people to value their natural heritage as an aesthetic and thus intangible asset.

'Ultimately, it's better than putting a price on everything and relying on fines and punishment,' he said.

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