

## **R.I.P.: Rivers In Peril**

By NURRIS ISHAK and NISHA SABANAYAGAM

30 October, 2006

13 years and millions of ringgit later, the government's 'Love Our River' campaign is a failure. More than half of the 400 rivers in Malaysia are badly polluted and getting worse. The rivers, they are a-dying...  
KUALA LUMPUR: Environmentalist Gurmit Singh stood silently, staring at Sungai Penchala.

The water was milky brown, coated with a black film of oil. A drain poured more milky water and fungus grew on many unidentifiable items floating in the river.

Gurmit has been visiting the river since the 1980s, long before the "Love Our River" campaign was launched 13 years ago.

"It's worse now than before," said Gurmit, the Centre for Environment, Development and Technology Malaysia executive director.

But it's not just Sungai Penchala that has taken a turn for the worse.

More than half the 400 rivers in Malaysia are polluted, according to the Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) and the Department of Environment (DOE).

Many of the rivers are more polluted than they were when the "Love Our River" campaign was launched. The campaign aimed to promote public awareness of the importance of rivers and highlight the critical state of river pollution.

It has failed.

The only rivers that have not been polluted are those which are away from human population or which run through less populated areas.

Asked about the worsening situation, DID river section director Cho Weng Keong said: "Let's put it this way. Without the campaign, the situation would have been worse. Since 1993, the population has grown, and with it, more rubbish and more pollution."

He quickly added: "It has not got worse or better, the situation has been sustained."

Cho said the DID would hire a consultant to evaluate the campaign's outcome.

Gurmit suggested using Sungai Klang as the acid test of the campaign's outcome. "The river has become worse. If you ask me, the money for the campaign is literally going down the drain."

The DID monitors 189 river basins — the area of a river and its tributaries — in Malaysia. In 2004, out of 120 river basins monitored, 62 were classified as polluted.

Early this month, Natural Resources and Environment Ministry parliamentary secretary Datuk Sazmi Miah said the campaign had focused too much on putting up billboards.

DID river section assistant director Ahmad Darus said the department had spent RM10 million during the campaign on "site activities" which included landscaping — building walkways and gazebos for the public.

Between 1993 and 2003, an average of 35 rivers a year were monitored, and gotong-royong and landscaping activities were carried on an average of 23 rivers, he said.

In 1993, RM100,000 was spent on billboards. An additional RM50,000 was spent in the subsequent years, said Ahmad. More than a thousand awareness seminars were also held in schools nationwide, he added.

Wet markets, landfills, slaughterhouses, squatters, industries and old houses are the main contributors to river pollution, where their untreated sewage flows straight into the river.

But a DOE source said the company cleaning out sewage, Indah Water Konsortium (IWK), was also to blame.

"Some of its water treatment plants do not meet the standards. It has 10,000 water treatment plants and it is expensive to maintain them. IWK needs to upgrade its technology."

The source said the biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) and chemical oxygen demand (COD) might be low in a certain volume of water, but the total volume which went into the river was not being controlled. "A big river like Sungai Pahang can dilute BOD and COD but smaller rivers like Sungai Klang may not be able to."

Amin Lin Abdullah, IWK's head of communications, said cleaning the rivers required a concerted effort.

"We have had incidents where our sub-contractors took a shortcut and dumped the waste into the river. We received complaints and we terminated their services."

Ahmad said control of the sources of sewage came under the jurisdiction of the local authorities.

Malaysians generate about 19,100 tonnes of household solid waste a day.

Dr P. Agamuthu, of Universiti Malaya, who specialises in solid and hazardous waste management, said in Sungai Klang alone, at least 50,000 tonnes of waste were collected from the log booms.

Sungai Klang has been classified as a "dead river", which means it is unable to sustain life.

Sungai Pinang is another dead river. Professor Dr Nor Azazi Zakaria, of Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, said Sungai Pinang could only become clean if the people stopped polluting it.

The DID said it was fighting an uphill battle. Ahmad said the DID was a lone ranger running a campaign which required the participation of others, including the local authorities and the public.

"There is no proper commitment from these parties."

That statement, said Housing and Local Government director-general Datuk Anwar Abdul Rahman, was unfair.

"The resources of many local councils are limited."

He said it cost money to carry out even a simple thing like fixing rubbish traps in drains before sewage

flowed into the river.

"Many local councils are poor and do not receive much funding to clean rivers," he added.

Public participation was just a question of getting people interested in the rivers, said Global Environment Centre (GEC) co-ordinator Suzana Mohkeri.

GEC had successfully worked with residents to clean certain stretches of the 20km Sungai PENCHALA, she said. The GEC initiates gotong-royong with the residents' associations in the area and teaches residents how to monitor the level of pollution.



More than half the 400 rivers in Malaysia are polluted, according to the Drainage and Irrigation Department and the Department of Environment.

### [Discussion here](#)

#### **RM5m given, but bill may exceed RM500m**

KUALA LUMPUR: Having failed with the "Love Our River" campaign, the Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) revamped it in 2002.

The new "One State, One River" programme required each state to adopt a river under the supervision of a state executive councillor.

DID river section director Cho Weng Keong said the strategy change was to ensure the participation of state departments. Cho said the DID had also set 2015 as the target date for all rivers in Malaysia to be clean.

"We realised that as the rivers were worsening, we had to concentrate on the 'One State, One River' campaign."

Though it was launched in 2002, the campaign only kicked off this year because of a lack of funding, he said.

Each state has been allocated RM5 million under the Ninth Malaysia Plan. But how much would it cost to clean up the rivers?

A DOE source said it was hard to give a ballpark figure. "Just a slight improvement to Sungai Melaka will cost RM500 million. It could take 10 years to clean Sungai Melaka alone."

On a more positive note, the DID is experimenting with technologies from



overseas to clean up rivers. This includes methods successfully practised for over 20 years in Japan.

The department is also conducting awareness programmes for students and teachers at 10 schools in Selangor and Kedah.

[Discussion here](#)



---

© Copyright 2006 The New Straits Times Press (M) Berhad. All rights reserved.