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## Malaysians paying the cost for polluted water

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KUALA LUMPUR: Indiscriminate littering seems to be the way of life for many Malaysians who are oblivious to the dire consequences of their doing.

Their rubbish most likely will end up in the waterways, choking the rivers and streams, and polluting the water.

However, it is not the litterbugs alone who poison the rivers.

The other perpetrators are the industries, businesses and even farming communities.

Thus the rivers are choked not only with rubbish but also industrial waste, animal carcasses, sewage and whatever that makes its way into the rivers.

The statistics provided by Natural Resources and Environment Ministry pointed out only 306 rivers in the country were categorised as clean in 2009 compared with 334 rivers in 2008.

The number categorised as polluted in 2009 increased by six to 54 compared with the previous year.

Many discard all sorts of waste indiscriminately for their convenience with the typical mentality 'as long it's not within my property it's alright'.

But just how many are aware that they have to pay someone to clean up the mess that they have caused.

The polluted rivers still serve as the water intake source for water treatment plants.

"So to clean the filthy rivers somebody has to pay, indirectly through the water tariffs?"

"The more polluted the rivers are, the more we have to spend to clean the water."

"Often the tax payer's money is used to clean up the rivers. In other words, our destructive attitude to the environment will return to haunt us in a different way," explained S Piarapakaran, President of the Association of Water and Energy (Awer).

Many domestic consumers are least concerned with their water bills, unlike the electric and telephone bills.

Maybe because they make up a small figure only.

However, as a responsible consumer it is only wise to know how the water tariff is calculated, that incorporates the water treatment and supply cost.

The cost involved, he explained can be divided into the cost of raw water, the treatment cost and the cost in supplying the water.

The cost of raw water, he said is imposed in various forms and serves as a source of income for the state governments.

“The lower the water quality, the higher the treatment cost.”

“Among the cost components involved are workers, chemicals, operation, maintenance and many more.”

“Lastly is the cost of supplying the water itself that encompasses the cost of operations, human resources and maintenance.”

“The different cost components will be tabulated and the tariff value will be calculated,” added Piarapakaran.

“However, in future the charges should be imposed according to the quality of the raw water.”

“As the water resources come under the state government, the onus is on the state to provide good quality raw water.”

“If the quality of the raw water depreciates, thus the cost of raw water must be reduced as well,” he said.

This, explained Piarapakaran, will provide economic value for water and assist the state government in conducting an economic analysis on water.

When raw water quality is on the decline, the cost to treat water goes up! This cost can also be considered as a shortage in usable water, that can even unleash a water crisis.

According to Piarapakaran, the efforts to gazette water catchment areas as permanent reserves have been very slow.

He said Malaysia would one day face water shortage if the authorities fail to mitigate the pollution of our waterways and gazette water catchment areas.

Piarapakaran referred to an incident involving the Sungai Semenyih Water Treatment Plant that was forced to shut down due to ammonia contamination in September 2010.

The incident left 1.2 million consumers without water in four Selangor districts; Petaling Jaya, Hulu Langat, Sepang and Kuala Langat.

According to Piarapakaran, the incident at the Sungai Semenyih Water Treatment Plant is a good example how the water supply can be disrupted.

“Sungai Kembong and Sungai Beranang are catchment areas for this treatment plant and the nearby landfill poses a serious problem for this treatment plant.”

“What happened is that the retaining walls of the landfill along Sungai Kembong collapsed causing ammonia leachate to flow into the river.”

Piarapakaran noted that this could easily be managed if there is an efficient waste disposal scheme.

“In developed countries they have successfully reduced the waste.”

“And reducing the waste should start right from home,” he said.

When water supply is disrupted due to pollution, this situation also involves cost.

As explained by Piarapakaran, a brief cost analysis can be made out of the water supply disruption.

“For this costing, we take one million consumers.”

“Each consumer is using 200 litres of water daily with the lowest tariff rate of RM0.57 per cubic metre.”

“We will find a lost of revenue amounting to RM114,000 per day.”

“If this water supply cut continues for several days, definitely this loss will multiply to a big amount,” he explained.

Domestic consumers may not feel much the cost involved in water disruption but how about the industries, freshwater fish breeders, restaurants and other commercial entities.

Any disruption in the water supply also involves other costs that one may not realise or often ignore; human resources, water tanker services, loss suffered by industries, the cost to clean up the pollution and not forgetting the inconvenience of the consumers.

“Who will pay for all these costs? If those who are contributors to this problem don’t pay, the consumers have to bear the brunt in the form of tariffs.”

“Say the water pollution increases by 10 per cent but the cost of treating the water with chemicals may increase much higher, 20 or even 30 per cent as more chemical is needed.”

“The cost of these chemicals often go up and this will be reflected in the tariff cost. The taxpayer’s money is used to clean the water,” said Piarapakaran.

“When we pollute the environment, we are actually releasing more chemicals into the environment,” he said. —  
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