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Malaysia in Grave Need to Better Manage Water Resources

When the water gets polluted the fingers are pointed at the authorities for their poor enforcement. Malaysia already has laws to protect its water resources namely the Environmental Quality Act 1974 (EQA) and the Water Services Industry Act 2006 (WSIA). The provisions under both laws empower the Department of Environment (DOE) and the National Water Services Commission (SPAN) to recover costs from polluters, order the polluters to clean up, and under WSIA offenders can be fined between RM100,000 and RM500,000 based on the gravity of their offence. However, are the laws adequate in protecting our natural water resources from pollution?

Reviewing the Laws

S Piarapakaran, the President of the Association of Water and Energy Research Malaysia (AWER) opined that both the EQA and WSIA had to be upgraded especially in recovering the cost involved due to water pollution.

"We have to take an integrated approach to identify the sources of pollution and set up pre-treatment facilities to reduce water pollution," said Piarapakaran.

He also pointed out that the pre-treatment plants and preventive measures were the cheaper options in the long-term.

Case Studies

Piarapakaran took the Sungai Langat basin as an example in elaborating on the ammonia pollution in our water resources. According to him, there are more than 33,000 individual septic tanks within the Sungai Langat basin that release sewage residues into the river. The old septic tanks must undergo desludging at least once every three years to ensure they function efficiently.

"If only all the house owners with individual septic tanks conduct desludging periodically, this will help to reduce drastically the ammonia content in the river," he added.

On rivers polluted by rubbish, Piarapakaran took the 120km long Sungai Klang, that crosses Kuala Lumpur and Selangor as an example where even a major clean up won't be able to revive the river.

"This river is polluted by our daily waste. Thus pre-treatment and reducing the pollutants are among the ways to save the river.

"Other options will only drain the financial resources of the authorities," Piarapakaran opined.

At the same time, in-depth studies must be undertaken to classify the level of pollution into critical, average and reasonable.

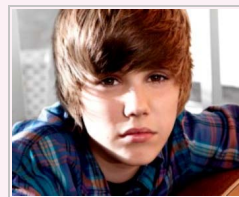
He explained that areas identified as critical should be given serious attention while areas in the other two categories should be closely monitored.

"The rehabilitation process must be carried out effectively. We should not carry out rehabilitation in haste," he stressed.

Referring to Foreign Countries

Piarapakaran noted that many developed nations are ahead in preserving their water resources and

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their efforts can be emulated by Malaysia. He pointed out Germany as the best model in enforcing laws that prohibit the pollution of raw water resources. Germany, he said, though mostly uses underground water resources due to low rainfall, has tough laws to regulate the underground water extraction to prevent serious impact on the environment.

Germany also has tough laws to control waste water where companies that release more than 750 cubic meters of waste water should appoint an independent official who will report and communicate with the authorities on all actions taken before the waste water is released.

"The laws in that country makes it clear that offenders are liable for all cost incurred when they pollute rivers."

He also pointed out Malaysia's neighbor, Singapore as another good example in water resource management where the nation has converted the stormwater into an important water source. There are strict regulations imposed to prevent the stormwater from being polluted by contaminants and human activities. Piarapakaran also noted that Singapore has gazetted its water catchment areas as part of its national security plan.

"This is something that we lack in Malaysia," he added.

The Solution

Despite the shortcomings in the law and enforcement, Piarapakaran felt that there is room for improvement.

"The government should start by adopting the effective measures taken by other nations as a benchmark in protecting Malaysia's water resources.

"This is also in line with the government's vision to achieve a developed nation status by 2020," noted Piarapakaran.

Water catchment areas should be gazetted as forest reserves within the next two to five years, a critical period for the state governments to act. He is also of the opinion that all agencies relating to water be consolidated under the Ministry of Energy, Green Technology and Water. However, he said, the DOE should continue to monitor the raw water quality while the Health Ministry should monitor the treated water quality to ensure transparent evaluation.

The Bigger Picture

Piarapakaran also suggested the same transformation should be extended to Sabah and Sarawak where SPAN has no authority. He added that transparency of water services in Sabah and Sarawak is still lacking.

"All the transformation processes should be implemented within the next five years to guarantee water supply in Malaysia. This is because water is one important component in national security. Through this transformation, we may be able to prevent a serious water crisis. Thus, the given timeframe is more than adequate.

"We have to start from now with compelling steps for the benefit of the coming generations.

- Bernama

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