

# Take care of urban rivers

MOST Malaysians have the romantic notion that water comes from pristine rainfall that collects in clear streams, leading to rivers and lakes before ending in reservoirs to flow out through our taps.

In reality, the picture is not quite that perfect.

The truth is that most of our water flows through drains before it gets treated to become drinking water.

By drains, I do mean the *longkang*, *kawah* and monsoon drains that we often neglect and ignore.

Many Malaysians do not realise that concreted drains are actually an essential part of the water eco-system that needs to be protected.

Instead, many regard our drainage system as a convenient waste disposal outlet. You only need to walk to a nearby drain to see it filled with rubbish and, in extreme cases, large items such as old television sets and computer monitors.

The waste not only contaminates local natural waterways, but also inhibits aquatic life and causes odour.

If you think water treatment facilities will be able to treat all the polluted water they receive, you are mistaken.

In July 2009, two water treatment plants in Hulu Langat and Sepang had to shut down for two weeks due to contamination from effluents from a nearby industrial area.

The shutdown affected the lives of 20,000 residents depending on these two treatment plants.

Just last year, more than 1.2 mil-

lion residents in four districts in Selangor were affected by the closure of the Sungai Semenyih water treatment plant.

This is just another example of how contamination can affect one's access to water.

What is more worrying is when drought occurs, the water levels in lakes and rivers will fall. If pollution levels remain constant, this will inevitably impact the concentration of pollution in our water sources.

As such, water treatment plants will have greater difficulty in treating polluted raw water. This compounds the effects of the drought. We should all take responsibility and try our best to stop polluting our rivers.

Many people think our urban rivers are beyond repair but I think otherwise.

In 2007, the Global Environment Centre partnered with GAB Foundation to carry out a unique initiative under the foundation's Water (Working Actively Through Education & Rehabilitation) project.

This was aimed at rehabilitating a 2.5km stretch of Sungai Way in Selangor. At the start of the project, the river was classified as Class IV to V in the Water Quality Index. This indicated that the river was heavily polluted and that no organism could survive under such conditions.

With the support of the Selangor Department of Irrigation and Drainage, Selangor Water Management Board, Selangor Department of Environment and Petaling Jaya City

Council, a series of community education and engagement programmes were carried out.

Activities included joint community river clean-ups and active management and monitoring of the river by our team with the help of volunteers.

After three years, Sungai Way has now been successfully rehabilitated and is now categorised as Class III in the Water Quality Index, meaning organisms such as flora and fish can now survive in the water.

In fact, if you take a walk along Sungai Way today, you will see dragonflies, catfish and even herons in the vicinity.

In the spirit of World Water Day, we hope that from this day on, all Malaysians will start treating our urban rivers with the respect they deserve.

We also hope that more urban rivers can be successfully rehabilitated like the Sungai Way.

**DR K. KALITHASAN**  
River care programme coordinator  
Global Environment Centre  
Petaling Jaya, Selangor

## One body to run it

THE assurance given by the prime minister in tackling water-related issues is an important milestone.

Water is a matter of national security and failure to safeguard it will lead to security and supply problems.

One of the main issues is that the

management of water throughout the usage cycle is still segregated.

Many agencies are involved and integrated efforts are not in place. Climate change has a direct impact on water sources, but a divided water management can cause more damage than climate change.

The water sector actually operates in a closed-loop system. The raw water we consume is from the environment. We treat and supply it to consumers and, finally, produce waste water.

This waste water needs to be treated before being discharged into the environment again.

For this model to function, the environment must be able to sustain our waste and demand parameters. This is because the environment, as a whole, has limited carrying capacity.

The closed-loop system is beneficial, but our failure to be efficient can cause water shortage, pollution and high water tariffs.

One of the first steps is to unify the water agencies under one ministry. They should be under the Energy, Green Technology and Water Ministry at federal level. The ministry can then engage state governments more effectively. Water is a precious gift. How we manage it can differentiate Malaysia from the rest.

**S. PIARAPAKARAN**  
President  
Association of Water and Energy  
Research Malaysia  
Puchong, Selangor