

Unloved rivers

ALMOST two decades ago, the "Love Our Rivers" campaign began as part of a larger exercise to save the environment. However, after some initial success, the endeavour was declared a failure in 2007. Following its rebranding and more millions spent on rehabilitating polluted rivers accompanied by an enhanced public awareness programme, the results have remained disappointing. Although a few waterways have improved, between 2007 and 2009, the number of clean river basins dropped from 91 to 70 and there are as many as 64 polluted rivers, up from 45. These appalling statistics are a severe indictment of the attitude of Malaysians towards their rivers. Contaminated natural systems disrupt the supply of clean water, which negatively impacts the environment. The long-term consequences are difficult and expensive to reverse.

Much has been written about the deadlier than dead rivers of Penang, Sungai Pinang and Sungai Juru, where attempts have been made to clean them up but to no avail. And they are not alone. In states proud to be developed, like Johor, dead rivers are a fact of life — Sungai Segget, Sungai Skudai and Sungai Tebrau. The murder of these rivers are attributable to rubbish dumping by riverside settlers, pollution from industrial effluents and the disgusting habit of turning rivers into open sewers. It is a strange oxymoron for a people so demanding of economic growth and higher living standards to be so accepting of such deplorable standards of public and environmental health. Sadly, the stubborn lack of care for social and communal goods places the country firmly in the ranks of the least-developed Third World.

Given that public education is looking to be a waste of time and resources, the solution seems obvious: hit the pockets of the polluters and garbage dumpers. And the government has done this. Culprits are fined, but not quite hard enough. Factories and workshops tend to be repeat offenders because green technology is too expensive, making paying fines a better option. As to the problem of household rubbish, a last-ditch move would be to relocate riverside dwellings, provide garbage disposal services and make unauthorised dumping illegal. Sewage disposal should be a public policy priority. But criminalising actions do not necessarily lead to good citizenship. And policing can be costly and onerous. There is perhaps no other choice but to persist in the uphill struggle of a holistic, multi-agency approach involving the private sector at a localised level. This indeed is the rationale for the comparatively more effective Department of Irrigation and Drainage's 1State, 1River project.