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The rivers continue to die

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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

A toad, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, would not survive more than two minutes if it fell into Sungai Pinang in Penang. He said this in 2002 when he was deputy prime minister. Now, the toad probably would not last two seconds. For, after 13 years and millions of ringgit, as NURRIS ISHAK and NISHA SABANAYAGAM discover, the 'Love Our River' campaign has sunk.

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 subse-

quent 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 peo-