

Giving life back to our rivers

StarMetro continues to look into the sorry state of our rivers; this time throwing the spotlight on efforts by NGOs such as the Global Environment Centre in cleaning up rivers in the Klang Valley

story by
GRACE CHEN

gracechen@thestar.com.my

POLLUTION in Malaysia's rivers is a worrying problem. Take, for example, Sungai Langat in Selangor; two years ago, it was classified under Class 3 and 4 and Universiti Putra Malaysia Environmental Forensics Research Centre head Dr Hafizan Juahir warned that if nothing was done, the river was as good as dead.

Worse still, in 2007, Sungai Juru in Penang was listed as Class 5 by Environment Department (DOE), making it unable to support either fish or aquatic plants.

More recently, in Kuala Lumpur, January saw a trail of dead fish flowing from Masjid Jamek to Brickfields in Sungai Klang.

According to Global Environment Centre (GEC) director Faizal Parish, for up to 1km from its source, river water would generally fall into the Class One or drinkable category.

Another 2km downstream, when it runs through housing areas, wash-off from the roads

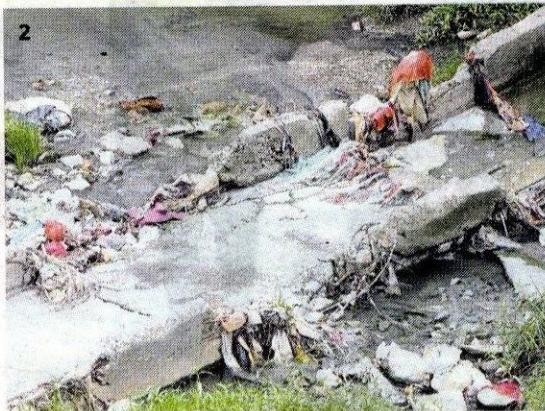
and wastewater from drains makes it deteriorate from Class Two to Class Four. By the time it reaches an urban area such as Kuala Lumpur, the river water is usually only safe to water plants because of the presence of E. coli, a bacteria found in human faeces.

According to Faizal, this is because not all housing areas in the Klang Valley are equipped with proper sewage treatment facilities. For example, he cited a treatment plant in Sungai Bunus that could only cater to 600,000 people while the Klang Valley has a population of eight million.

However, he said this would be worked on in the River of Life project, which aimed to upgrade eight rivers in the Klang Valley — Sungai Gombak, Sungai Batu, Sungai Jinjang, Sungai Keroh, Sungai Bunus, Sungai Ampang, Sungai Kerayong and Sungai Kelang — to Class 2B (safe to touch) by 2020.

In addition to the construction of treatment plants, there will be a major undertaking to instal underground pipes where they were previously non-existent in older housing areas.

The second part takes a long look at the industrial sector, particularly SMEs, which do not treat their discharged water, especially in areas such as Kepong and Jinjang.



2



3

1 (Front row, from left) Faizal, Malaysian Water Partnership vice chairperson Datuk Hanapi Mohamad Noor, Lim, UKM Institute for Environment and Development senior lecturer and research fellow Dr Rahmah Elfithri, Drainage and Irrigation Department senior assistant director Dr Teo Fang Yenn and grant recipients of the National River Care Fund.

— GRACE CHEN/
The Star

2 It is common to see household rubbish in Sungai Gombak.
— filepic

3 All kinds of waste is collected on a daily basis by rubbish traps installed in rivers. This is part of the collected litter from Sungai Batu.
— filepic

Sullage, which is water flowing from the kitchen sink into the drains, will also come under the microscope. Households as well as restaurants washing their plates in back lanes are contributors to the pollution. For the last 20 years, all this waste has been flowing into the rivers.

In urging the community to take full charge to combat water pollution, Faizal advised the public to refrain from eating at shops that did not comply with legal sanitation practices.

Lastly, he said, Malaysians had to get rid of the littering habit.

Rubbish eventually gets into the rivers, clogs up the waterways and is a major contributor to flash floods.

"The target by 2020 is to restore river water to Class 2B category in a collective clean-up. Basically, it will qualify a water body safe for kayaking," Faizal explains.

On an optimistic note, he said, if all parties gave their full cooperation, it would then be possible to boat all the way from Taman Melawati to Masjid Jamek; but it will come at a price.

So far, GEC has spent more than RM50,000 under its National River Care Fund (NRCF) programme.

Out of this, six community groups received between

RM5,000 and RM8,000 for projects that ran from awareness programmes to river clean-ups. Among the recipients was Taman Warisan Hulu Klang Recreational Residents Association which got a grant for RM5,000 to restore the natural flow of Sungai Klang, which had been affected by flooding after water was released from a nearby dam.

Another RM8,000 went towards the clean-up and beautification of the AU3 Recreation Park river.

Under the river rehabilitation category, a partnership between Kuala Lumpur City Hall and the Drainage and Irrigation Department will see a grant of RM10,000 to clear sedimentation and garbage along the 500m stretch of Sungai Midah, which flows through Sungai Besi.

Funded by the corporate sector and public donations, NRCF advisory committee member Datuk Lim Chow Hock said the next cycle of applications would open next month.

"The current amount covers only five states. For the next cycle, we are asking for RM1mil.

"With the full cooperation of the communities and governing authorities, this should be enough to cover 56 rivers flowing in all 13 states in Malaysia," said Lim.