

MY SAY: The myth about going green

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

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In my last column, I cited examples of how the UK initiated its green energy programme and the importance of walking the talk. While this may be the case for the UK government, it is not necessarily so for British companies.

A case in point: two British companies were found to have exported some 1,400 tonnes of hazardous waste to Brazilian ports. This was confirmed by the country's environmental inspectorate recently. The suspected illegal shipments are said to contain toxic waste from hospitals and elsewhere, including syringes, condoms and nappies. A Brazilian company said to be acting as an intermediary in the illegal activity was also named.

The Basel Convention of 1992 specifically prevents the dumping of hazardous waste from developed to developing countries. Both Brazil and Britain are signatories to the convention. In addition, the European Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment directive, which came into force in 2007, bans the export of any electrical item unless it is in working order.

Dumping toxic and hazardous waste is, of course, not new. Many developing countries have been targeted for this unscrupulous activity because of the huge profits involved. It is reportedly so lucrative that criminal gangs are attracted to it.

At the same time, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the ecological damage that such activities can cause when toxic waste is left unattended or placed in landfills. For example, any seepage into water tables can poison aquatic life as well as humans who consume the contaminated water. Generally, it is the poor who suffer because of the lack of clean water supply.

Daniel Coleman, author of the best-selling *Emotional Intelligence*, recently released a book entitled *Ecological Intelligence: How knowing the hidden impacts of what we buy can change everything*. He noted that despite the abundance of resources and material wealth around us, their use has a high cost attached to it. For instance, many are not aware what goes into making an item that we use, including its packaging, transporting, distribution and eventual disposal.

Of course, the ultimate impact will be on the users and the environment. Producing items as common as textiles is not as innocuous as we think. Beginning with the yarn, the products may have to undergo some synthetic chemical processes, including the use of dyes, some of which may be hazardous. So, we can imagine what it is like when it involves intricate electrical circuitry and electronics, not to mention the hundreds of chemicals that go into making drugs and medicinal items for everyday use. How much do we know of their production lifecycle and disposal? Little, if at all, in making potential items that pollute, some of which can practically last forever as they are not at all degradable.

So, Coleman is right in asserting that our understanding of the term "green" is rather shallow and one dimensional when we disregard the entire lifecycle of the item itself. The hidden aspect of the product has never been factored into our consideration due largely to our ignorance.

A good example is tobacco. It is not only the products alone that can kill — the cultivation of tobacco and the elaborate subsequent treatments involved in making cigarettes are hazardous too. A stick of cigarette can contain thousands of other chemicals, some of which are fatal. Yet, people who smoke are ignorant of this fact.

Ecological Intelligence is about the need to know and learn, and to think differently about what "green" actually entails. Coleman argues that it is important to be acutely aware of the lifecycle of each product, from the time the raw materials are treated right to how it is disposed of, and the cost to us and the environment.

Once this is known, what is regarded as green may not appear green, after all. The fact is that nothing remains "eco-friendly" once a product has undergone industrial processes that change the eco-friendly nature of the original substance. To consider it green as such may be a myth. So, too, is recycling as it leaves many ecological marks. The same could be argued of green services as well.

In other words, to be truly green, we have to reduce our consumption to the essentials, given the complexity and the intricacies involved between what is "natural" and "man-made" and hence, what is sustainable and what is not. In short, there must be "radical transparency" — make information available to the public about the details of the lifecycle of an item and its impact.

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