

## Development without the tears

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Article

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**We don't love our rivers. And we fell our trees, clear our jungles and level hills. Malaysians had better pay heed or they will have to pay for all the uncaring development.**

SUCH is its importance that no less than the president of Indonesia saw it fit to talk about it at the 50th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Institutes of Higher Learning early this month.

The president, in his address at Istana Merdeka in Jakarta, dealt passionately with the conference topic which was, "Disaster Management through Regional Co-operation".

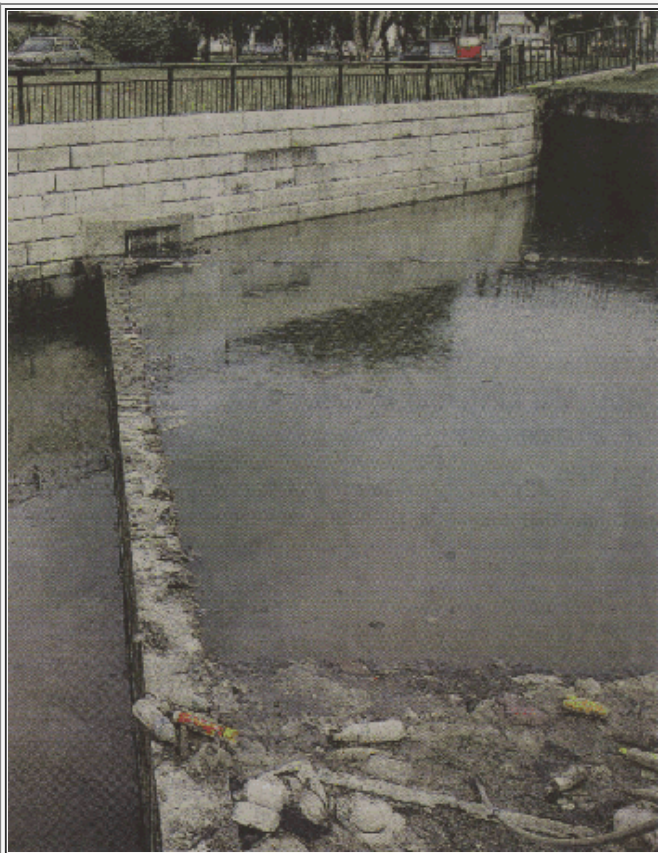
For someone who is responsible for hundreds of millions vulnerable to disasters, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono himself had been faced natural disasters several times since assuming the presidency not too long ago.

Malaysian delegates at the celebrations felt blessed to be spared major natural calamities and most of the minor ones as well, with the exception of some seasonal floods.

However, we are also among the most ungrateful, perhaps, when it comes to environmental ethics. Rather than appreciate our good fortune, we are instead fond of inviting calamities through negligence and attitude.

The many cases of human-made landslides causing damage to the environment and the loss of private property and lives reported is only the tip of the iceberg. There are others which may not be so obvious at present but will eventually come to haunt us at some point in the future.

The recent shocking revelation that the much-touted "Love Our River" campaign has come to naught (NST, Oct. 30) cannot be more telling of the kind of destructive future we are courting, given that our water resources are getting scarce. Indeed, soon the Klang Valley will run out of water.



Sungai Bintagor is one of the most polluted streams in Kuching. Many rivers in Malaysia are more polluted now than before the 'Love Our River' campaign was launched.

After 13 years and millions of ringgit later, more than half of the 4,000 rivers in the country are reportedly

worsening and even more polluted.

Without the campaign, the situation would have been worse off, claims the director of river section of the Drainage and Irrigation Department.

But this is no consolation, even though the department seems confident that by some "miracle" come 2015, all rivers in Malaysia can be cleaned. We will have to wait and see, and hope miracles can still happen.

Just a few days later (NST, Nov 5), we read that only one of the major cities and towns surveyed in Malaysia has been classified as "sustainable". And that is Malacca.

North Kuching is close to being sustainable while the rest are only moderately sustainable with Kota Baru being the least sustainable, according to the Malaysian Urban Indicators Network (MURNINet).

The network provided an indication of the quality of development and living standards in the towns and cities, based on measures of how sustainable development is carried out in those locations.

Not surprisingly, according to the study, most fared poorly in terms of cleanliness, the environment, public transport and community facilities.

While sustainable development can prove to be a vague and illusive concept, and difficult to translate into reality, in practice this is not so.

Sustainable development is often understood as the development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

At least "three pillars" have been identified with the concept — economic, social and environmental well-being. Some consider natural resources as the fourth pillar.

Indeed, each pillar is relevant to a number of things, ranging from business development to culture, from physical development to human values.

For example, in the urban context, sustainable development refers to not only the quality of life in an existing location but also the impact it leaves on the future populace in terms of ecology, culture, politics, society or economy.

Simply put, are we currently living within our means?

Kuala Lumpur, although it is not part of the MURNINet evaluation exercise, fares reasonably well based on similar international evaluation.

In the World's Most Livable Cities survey by The Economist, Kuala Lumpur was placed just below the top 50 livable cities among the 127 countries surveyed.

Melbourne, Australia and Vancouver featured high up.

The Mercer list has Kuala Lumpur at number 75 — 61 places behind Melbourne.

This means that the development of the capital city has room for improvement beyond just the physical ones.

And this is a lesson to be learned as we move into the next phase of development under the Ninth Malaysia Plan.

Under the last Budget, environment was given another booster. But as noted, sustainable development is beyond just the environment, which is just one of its pillars.

Immediately, what comes to mind is the creating of a "metropolis" in south Johor covering an area which is said to be about three times the size of Singapore, costing more than RM45 billion over the next five years.

The ultimate question that must be asked is: Will it be sustainable development and, if so, how livable will it be by then and for how long?

Would it nudge out Malacca as the most livable state by then, especially when reportedly the historical city is keen to have an "open Disneyland".

Of course, development in towns and cities is to be encouraged as long as it is within the framework of sustainable development. And it does not affect "the overall well being" of the country in the name of development.

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