

Nature's early warning system can serve us well

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A Friend returned from Banda Aceh last week telling how horrible the situation is there.

People are dying daily, sometimes in the most tragic way, such as the child who died from choking on too much mud.

This happened while world leaders were warning system - although some claim that it is not entirely foolproof.

On hindsight, it is strange that we are now talking about an early warning system (EWS), when the system is around us every day, that is, Mother Nature herself. Going by some of the anecdotes related after the tsunami, this point has been totally missed.

Take, for example, the case when various sea creatures landed on the shores of Penang and Kedah.

To some people, this "rare" incident was a clear signal of some impending disaster from the sea, and thus took steps to move away to safer places.

In doing so, they avoided the catastrophe.

To these people, EWS is in the book of nature itself.

There were also stories of fishermen netting an unusually large amount of catch just before the tsunami but failed to recognise this beyond their "good luck" and disregarded it as any form of EWS.

Generally, it is not a coincidence to read reports that there were proportionally fewer animal carcasses found in the tsunami-hit areas.

Animals, which have a developed sense of EWS, had avoided the areas.

The case of the elephants in Thailand is one, and that of an animal park in Sri Lanka another.

Locally, too, many people related that the morning of Dec 26 was relatively quite - seemingly fewer birds were spotted in the vicinity of the tragedy. This looks like another EWS to those who could discern well.

In other words, if only we take the trouble to "listen" to nature, and "understand" the subtle signals, sent, many lives would have been spared.

Unfortunately, most of us have lost such abilities, unlike our forefathers, as we turn against nature.

The case of the mangrove swamps is a case in point. The swamps have a vital role to play as part of the natural habitat, and managed to protect humans from the tsunami.

While many of the man-made structures were swept away, the mangroves stood intact and cushioned the impact of the waves.

So, while we rightly want to invest in a sophisticated and technical EWS, we also must be serious about re-investing in the natural habitats that we have destroyed and lost.

We need to retrain ourselves on how to listen and understand the signals from the equally sophisticated natural systems, which are accessible to almost everyone who cares.

While technology is important, it is not a panacea for solving the problems faced by Mother Earth.

Technology is merely an aid to the natural eco-system so that we can decipher its messages even better. If we do not allow the ecosystem to function in its natural state, no amount of technology can give us an effective EWS.

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