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ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN MALAYSIA

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ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN MALAYSIA ; *the key means
of perspective.*

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Garbage and scenes of filth in public places are not a rarity in Malaysian urban life; indeed they are threatening to become a normal aspect of the landscape. Drains along residential and commercial streets remain blocked for days on end with an endless variety of discarded household items ranging from the day's refuse to an unwanted bicycle wheel; rubbish bins that become the object of foraging step animals empty their contents on the streets if such bins are not well anchored; wrappings and other small objects litter the roads as occupants of motor vehicles get rid of the unwanted through the windows; refuse dumps spring up overnight in the most unlikely habitats; public recreation areas emit stench from articles carelessly discarded by their users; the pasar malam stalls leave behind them a story of their presence the night before; the list is endless. The warning signs against indiscriminate garbage disposal are not merely ignored but are also often ironically the spots where refuse is to be discovered. The threat of fines on delinquents does not serve its deterrent value. The concern and outcries of a handful of public minded citizens fall on deaf ears. Legislation in itself is no solution to the problem of gross public apathy.

The most effective way of handling the problem of an unclean environment is through a mass-based public education programme. The Malaysian government launched on 2 October 1982 a month-long cleanliness campaign which has received wide publicity in the mass media and television. Cabinet ministers, key officials in government departments and other dignitaries have been utilising the week-ends to sweep up and clean areas of the town that have been notoriously filthy. Photographs and newsreports of well known personalities in public life armed with brooms, showeds, cangkuls have become familiar pieces during the cleanliness campaign period. There is no doubt that all this has an impact of sorts on the citizen reading about it in the papers as he savours his Sunday morning leisure or the television viewer watching

the news or the Peristiwa programme. Leaders of the community do of course motivate their people best through personal example, and the present cleanliness campaign has a message to everyone and it is best transmitted through cleanliness activities, cleanliness contests, posters, etc. But what happens when the cleanliness campaign period is over?

To ensure the momentum of the efforts begun to keep the environment clean, it is necessary to make each individual morally responsible to maintain a clean environment. But that cannot take place merely through exhortation from above or penalties imposed by law. It requires and awareness that can only be induced through public education, an appreciation of the worth of a clean environment as against a filthy one, indeed a realisation of what the environment really means to the life that is dependent upon it. The average Malaysian has little comprehension of even the meaning of the term "environment": to him it is a word that describes that which surrounds him. He does not see the environment as environmentalists see it, in its totality as natural and man-made ecological, political, economic, technological, social, legislative, cultural and aesthetic.⁽¹⁾

In order to achieve and maintain a healthy environment, the individual must be made aware of the need for such a way of life and how to ensure and maintain a safe environment for health, aesthetic and other reasons. "Awareness" thus is a state or condition of being informed and conscious about the issue and takes into account four vital features, that is, the person who is aware:

1. understands and perceives the problem through the knowledge and information provided in respect of the pertinent issue at hand.

¹ The Belgrade Charter provides a global framework for Environmental Education as produced and adopted at the Belgrade Workshop, Yugoslavia, 12-22 October 1977.

2. develops a concern for the solution to the problem that confronts him.
3. believes in the importance of overcoming the problem.
4. recognises the action he should take and that which others should take to solve the problem.

Thus awareness can be represented in the form of a continuum: from a state of no awareness to a state of high awareness; as one progresses from low to high, consciousness progressively increases. The different degrees of awareness can be defined as follows:

unaware : to ignore; ^{here} ~~have~~ ^{condition} the moral values are generally apt to be at subjective and selfish levels.

low awareness : little understanding of motives, actions or the sources of feelings, a state in which one acts automatically rather than consciously. It is a condition experienced frequently by virtually everyone, at one time or another and by some for a greater part of their lives.

aware : an ability to better order one's actions, whether they be physical or mental or both, it generally involves a more studied and careful response, a deliberate attempt.

high awareness : objective and altruistic; a state in which emotions seldom, if ever, interfere with the perception of the doer.

Levels of awareness change from time to time and according to a number of variables. One fluctuates from higher to lower levels of awareness or vice-versa, from moments of reflective self-consciousness

to levels of unawareness or particular issues, psychological and social factors also affect the level of awareness. Though in general terms, levels of awareness move constantly up and down, individuals do have a center of gravity, an average level, that is higher or lower than their fellow citizens. Why this should be so is at best speculative. Much depends on heredity, the influence of early environment on habits, the cultural values and moral codes taught and ingrained. Though not always the case, it has been observed that there is a likelihood that as one matures from the exposure to education and to other individuals and habits, that one is capable of developing a considerably higher degree of awareness; this is sometimes referred to as "natural" awareness. It is often at this level of awareness that one functions; and to be motivated to greater action one needs to be informed and educated until he can function at the fourth level shown in the category outlined earlier.

Thus effective awareness is not only knowing (cognition) but includes as well feeling (affective) and a willingness to take action (psychomotor). The extent of awareness that some Malaysians have shown towards environmental issues can be illustrated in the results of the following researches that have been conducted.

A study² of the environmental awareness of a group of 158 middle aged males in Kampung Medan, Kelang who had not gone beyond primary level of education and were within the generally low income level, showed that members of the group blamed a near by oil palm refinery as the major problem related to pollution in the area; this was followed by traffic pollution. Although the villagers showed an alertness to and a concern for the problem, they appeared to be uncertain or ignorant as to whether the problem could indeed be resolved and how to go about it. In terms of personal involvement, the majority had not taken any step beyond

² Din, Kadir, "Villager's Perception of Environmental Pollution in Kampung Medan, Kelang, Malaysia", proceedings of "Geography and the Third World" International Seminar, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, May 1980.

discussing the problem with their neighbours, while 10% had written letters and petition to the authorities concerned. Of the sample surveyed about one third felt that there was no solution to their problems, while the rest harboured mixed feelings.

A similar questionnaire survey³ on air pollution awareness in the Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya area showed that the degree of public apathy towards pollution is very low though there occurs marked sectoral variations in awareness. These variations are partly caused by socio-economics and demographic variables of the population. People are aware of the problems most immediate to them, such as the Batu Caves residents who are aware of dust in their area. However the problem of pollution was perceived as less serious when compared with other socio-economic problems of the city. This response is of particular interest, since the Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya area has a large urban-industrial centre, it is an area that has generated a number of problems, the most common being air pollution resulting from daily vehicular smoke usually emitted during traffic hold-ups and as a consequence of heavy industrial activities. The problems related to dust fall, sulphur dioxide content and heat have been measured to amount to a proportion that is astounding for the city; the city's populace recognises the presence of pollution but feels that there are other more pressing needs that need first priority.

Both the above two studies revealed the sad truth that residents in particular and the public at large are not willing to participate fully in measures that would seek to control and prevent pollution, the monetary terms they are willing to contribute to solve the problem are insignificant.

³ Azmah Ahmad et al, Air Pollution Awareness in the Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya Area, Malaysia, Monograph 2, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1979.

In a survey⁴ to determine whether the public in Penang is aware and concerned about their physical environment and if so what is the extent of their awareness and concern it was found that while there is a relatively significant degree of awareness that the environment is progressively getting worse, the level of concern was disappointingly low especially when related to some other issues such as education, inflation, unemployment. The action taken by the concerned few have been limited to those that benefit them directly. The study expected that the public in Penang, by virtue of a higher level of literacy, and greater environmental problems because of the urbanised nature of Georgetown and Penang Island, would be more concerned and more involved in improving the natural environment than the residents of other parts of Malaysia. This unfortunately was not the case which reflects the unwillingness of the public to play an active part or rather is this indicative that they are not as yet prepared, and aware and ready for such a role?

In a study⁵ conducted among school children in the Kelang area, it was found that environmental awareness was not significantly different after instruction in the relevant ecology topics than it was before such teaching. It proved that the teaching of ecology did not considerably enhance environmental awareness as one would have expected. About half the sample studied were moderately aware, 5% were highly aware 40% were slightly aware, and 5% unaware of environmental problems after exposure to some instruction in environmental issues.

However most pupils were aware and concerned about environmental problems that were familiar to them. But they were neither completely positive nor negative to problems of which they were not fully aware. This was particularly true of the problems far removed from them. As to a basic recognition of what could be done to alleviate these problems,

⁴ Goh, K.C., Pangiras & Tan P.K., "A preliminary study on public awareness and concern of the physical environment - the case of Georgetown, Penang," proceedings of the Vth International Symposium of Tropical Ecology, April 1979, Kuala Lumpur, pp.643-653.

⁵ Jayatilaka, Bridget C., Relevance of the Teaching of Ecology to Environmental Awareness: A Case Study of a Malaysian Secondary School, unpublished M.Ed. dissertation, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 1982.

the pupils were either positive, or, in the case of problems familiar to them, they felt something probably could be done.

On the role they could play, most pupils were quite definite about not being able to do anything that would substantially alter the situation. In their way of thinking the small role they felt they could play was considered too insignificant in relation to the intensity of the problem. An interesting discovery in this study was that there was no significant difference in the perception of the science and commerce students as regards environmental problems. In fact, a slightly higher score was recorded from commerce students on the test of environmental awareness.

In a similar study⁶ conducted among secondary school students in Selangor, students had considerable knowledge of certain aspects of environmental pollution such as causes, sources, effects and examples of environmental pollution; this also extended to ways and methods of controlling environmental pollution. On other aspects such as their conceptualisation of the terms "environmental pollution" and "pollutant" and on the knowledge they possessed of organisations and agencies involved in pollution control, the knowledge and understanding of the secondary students was poor.

In respect of the attitudes of the students towards environmental pollution, the study revealed that the majority of the students possessed a favourable overall attitude. Generally the students showed an enthusiasm for a greater knowledge of environmental pollution; they acknowledged the existence of an environmental crisis and agreed that environmental education was required to overcome the problem. The students also felt depressed by ^{the} sight of environmental pollution; they appeared to subscribe and read magazines with articles on pollution, and felt that man's ignorance and indifference were the major causes of environmental pollution.

Although they accepted and acknowledged the existence of environmental pollution and showed a preference for a cleaner and unpolluted environment, a sizeable proportion of the students in the study were of the opinion

⁶ Ponniah, Judy G., Environmental Pollution: Knowledge and Attitudes of Malaysian Secondary School Students, thesis submitted for the M.Ed. Degree (unpublished) 1981.

that there was no role that they could play to reduce the intensity of the problem. The factors which emerged as influencing levels of student knowledge and understanding of environmental pollution were grade levels, ability levels and location of school. Those influencing attitudes towards environmental pollution were grade levels and ability levels. The sex of the student had no significant effect on the knowledge, understanding or attitudes they showed towards environmental pollution. The majority of the students cited the mass media (newspapers, television and radio) and school as their source of information on environmental pollution. It would appear that the mass media is certainly an important channel through which to impart knowledge on environmental issues.

The above studies are clear indicators that although adults and students are knowledgeable about environmental problems, they had not reached the level of being action-oriented. It would be unjust to be overly critical of school students who have little knowledge of, or unwilling to exert themselves on environmental pollution matters. But it is certainly far more serious in the case of the adult population who respond in a fashion similar to that of the school children. Their reluctance to help physically, organisationally or monetarily to alleviate a massive and urgent problem that is certain to affect them is what makes the situation not only sad but grim. This lack of commitment can be attributed to the fact that citizens are often quite simply apathetic. Their typical reaction is one that places the burden of responsibility on the government, arguing that the taxes they pay annually and the personnel employed by the appropriate government departments have a duty to keep the environment free by legislation, execution of laws, and actual removal of environmental hazards from their lives. This popular reaction has been well documented in a number of studies.

This does not in any way imply that there are no concerned citizens in the country on environmental issues. Few and far between are the dedicated who have hitherto been responsible for the present movement towards creating environmental consciousness, campaigning for environmental conservation and economic use of natural resources. The dedication of

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voluntary groups such as the Sahabat Alam Malaysia (Friends of the Earth Malaysia), Malayan Nature Society, Environmental Protection Society and consumer organizations (notably the Consumer Association of Penang) have to be saluted. Their sincere support of government programmes and relentless activities in this direction have drawn local and international recognition. Though government programmes have been local in nature, related to one specific issue such as the present anti-litter cleanliness campaign, voluntary organizations, through public forums, seminars and newspaper reports have been responsible for bringing to the public the broader issues related to the environment. These include issues related to land use, logging, timber trade and the subsequent destruction of the forest; the irrational use of local and natural resources; the virtues of a balanced ecosystem, and the role of a healthy environment for a better quality of life. These are just a few of the areas that have received their attention.

The following are suggested as methods by which environmental awareness might be increased to reach the fourth level as mentioned earlier:

1. The major initiative should continue to come from the government. For an individual to care about the environment all his basic needs should be first satisfied. This also implies that whilst an overall policy is essential, it is necessary to deal with sectoral problems separately and local issues directly. After all, only when there is a fulfillment of fundamental human needs can there be a true appreciation of aesthetic values, an element on which environmental awareness depends.

2. It is necessary to introduce environmental education and environmental science through formal and non-formal channels of education and through training programmes.

3. The target group should include teachers, all levels of civil servants and the staff of the private sector. The programme should not be limited to the study of surface symptoms of environmental problems but deal also with the

development of attitudes, values, beliefs and feelings of the target population towards the environmental. The aim of environmental education must be ^{to} bring about environmental literacy among the citizens of the country.

3. Appropriate law and legislation are essential and their efficient and effective implementation is essential for creating environmental awareness. If one cannot learn, one has to be taught. Law enforcement has to be relentless since complacency is bound to replace habits that are only superficially required.
4. People participation must be encouraged in all environmental programmes. The success of programmes would be assured if wide people involvement has been harnessed to plan and implement the activities. Public involvement in decision making on these matters would be a useful contribution. In this respect grass-root committees such as the rukun-tetangga and other community agencies must be mobilised to active participation in creating environmental education.
5. People should be clear of the channels available for them to take action and to transmit their feed back reactions. A promise of follow-up should be honoured, and an active response to citizen queries should be maintained.
6. People should act as watch-dogs on the polluting agencies that damage the environment. They can exert pressure on polluting agencies to clear up their mess and make amends by carrying out anti-pollution activities such as planting trees, etc.
7. Children should be encouraged to play an active part in maintaining a healthy environment. Programmes in schools should aim to teach children values that would be useful for them as adults. School clubs and field study experiences are important for youth to understand human relationships and man's dependence on nature.

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8. Environmental programmes must be action-orientated. They must be clearly outlined, well advertised in a manner that is comprehensible to all. Hence the role of the mass media has to be maximised so as to reach every individual, to educate and reinforce him toward positive action. With this, facilities and opportunities must be available for people to practice good environmental habits. This includes ready availability of dust bins and the maintenance of an efficient clearing system.
9. All environmental programmes and education should be on a continuous basis rather than on an incidental or 'crisis-orientated' one. The education should be viewed as a life-long process aiming to achieve a change in values and behavior. In this respect, action orientated workshops, seminars and conferences which are continuously organised must inform not only the people but also decision makers and policy planners.
10. Voluntary organisations must be encouraged to continue their important and useful contribution in creating environmental awareness and all support should be provided for them to become an important arm of the government.

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