

Editorial

The Human Environment – Are We Committing Suicide?

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IN THE 4th century BC, weather, climate, water supply, eating habits and the mode of life, were taken to be essential considerations by the Hippocratic school of healers for “whoever wishes to investigate medicine properly”. Today, these are supplemented by a multiplicity of other environmental factors including the gross pollution of the atmosphere by motor and industrial emissions and by nuclear radiations; pollution of the land by industrial wastes and pesticides; pollution of streams, lakes and seas by sewage, industrial effluent and oil; and the destruction of life support systems such as our forests.

Air Pollution

The major sources of air pollution in Malaysia are emissions of carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons resulting from the incomplete combustion of fuel by the internal combustion engine. The number of vehicles registered in Peninsular Malaysia has increased by 726% from 153,377 vehicles in 1959 to 1,267,119 vehicles in 1975 (Fig. 1) indicating the extent of the problem that is being faced. The day should not be long before air pollution becomes a major health hazard as in the case of the London smog disaster of 1952 when some 4,000 deaths were directly attributed to air pollution.

Smog is so severe in the Los Angeles area that in 1969, a group of academicians advised “anyone who does not have compelling reasons to remain to move out of smoggy portions of Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties to avoid chronic respiratory diseases like bronchitis and emphysema” (Ehrlich *et al.*, 1973).

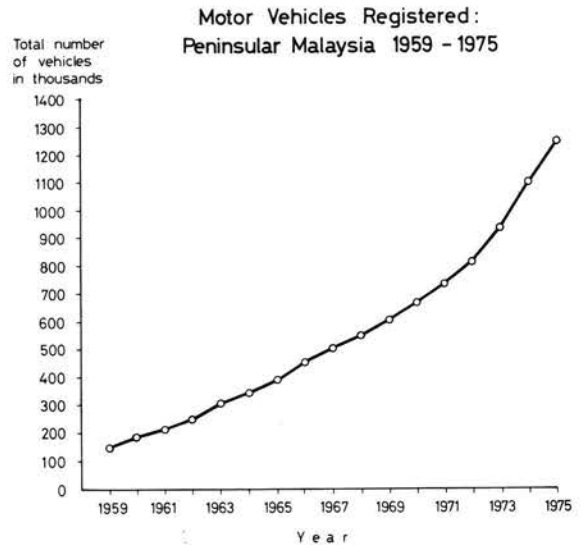


Fig. 1. Number of motor vehicles registered in Peninsular Malaysia, 1959 to 1975, showing that there is a 726% increase during the 17 year period in question.

Water Pollution

In the 1976-77 Economic Report (Ministry of Finance, Malaysia 1976), the Government of Malaysia has noted that pollution of inland waters especially by industrial wastes is an increasing problem. The wastes from the oil palm industry alone is estimated to equal the wastes from a community of 11.8 million people (Sekaran, 1973). On an average each oil palm mill discharges about 2½ tonnes of pollutants

into inland waters each day. Preliminary studies by Government Departments suggest that at least 11 river basins are at present facing water pollution problems of a serious magnitude. Within these river basins 6 rivers are grossly polluted, 8 others are moderately polluted and between 12 to 15 other rivers are facing potential water pollution problems.

A preliminary study conducted by the Ministry of Health on water in Sungai Sekudai in Johore (one of 6 grossly polluted rivers) in 1975 shows that the river has been highly polluted and that this has been due mainly to the discharging of untreated wastes by 30 factories which are responsible for about 72% of the total wastes in the river. The fact that the intake of water supplies of several towns, including Kluang in Johore and Kemaman in Trengganu, are downstream from where factories discharge their effluents poses a serious hazard. It also increases the cost of water purification. Perhaps industries should be required to take their water supplies downstream from where they discharge their effluents.

Water Shortage

Intertwined with the need for fresh water supplies is another resource: forests. Since ancient times man has recognized that deforestation results

in heavy soil erosion, floods, and local changes in the climate. The annual floods that have plagued northern China since ancient times are due to deforestation during the early dynasties. Particularly damaging is the practice of "clear cutting" that is the whole sale removal of large tracts of mature forest. The inevitable erosion, flooding and drought follow, accompanied by severe water pollution. It would seem that large parts of Malaysia are presently subjected to alternate periods of flooding and drought, interspersed with periods when water supplies are heavily clouded with colloids brought on by soil erosion.

If we are to preserve the health of our peoples, as well as the heritage of our children, we must surely reverse this trend to commit environmental suicide.

References

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