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Letter to the Editor

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TREAT EVERY DAY AS EARTH DAY

It is Earth Day on April 22. It is a day to remember Mother Earth and how we treat her. It is not enough to dedicate one day in a year to remember her if we are to save her. We must remember her every day, and put the environment and ecology at the centre of decision-making, if we are to prevent future calamities that result in catastrophic economic impacts.

Once again, Earth Day is happening during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Nations continue to juggle between containing the pandemic and managing their economic recovery. Sufficient concern for the environment and ecology is still lagging behind.

The virus itself is believed to have emerged from environmental mishandling, viz. the trade and consumption of wildlife by humans. Major landmark reports from the U.N have warned about the emergence or re-emergence of infectious diseases due to mainly increasing human encroachments on natural environments such as land clearing and habitat fragmentation, reductions in biodiversity.

Our current economic and development model continues to be unsustainable with negative consequences not only on our quality of life but threatens our continued existence on earth.

Indeed, the just-released report from the World Meteorological Organization on the ‘State of the Global Climate’ shows that the global average temperature in 2020 was about 1.2-degree C above pre-industrial level, which is “dangerously close” to the 1.5-degree C limit advocated by scientists to stave off the worst impacts of climate change.

Our predominant development model places emphasis on economic and commercial activities, whilst treating health and environmental problems as side effects that can be dealt with, piecemeal, when they arise. This must not be the case, as these so-called ‘side effects’ will definitely overwhelm the ‘mainstream’ objective of economic growth if we do not take them more seriously.

The Covid-19 health crisis has already overwhelmed the mainstream objective of economic growth. Similarly, the recent water crises and intense flooding episodes have shown how environmental calamities can put the brakes on the economy if we continue to not deal with them urgently and seriously.

The water and flooding crisis are just the tips of the iceberg, as we encounter the unfolding of climate change and its impacts, which will be catastrophic not only for human lives but our economy as well. It is not sufficiently realised that the environment and natural resources are the foundation of the economy and they set the parameters of how much economic growth can be sustained.

We once again call for transformative commitments and paradigm shifts in the way we produce and consume. A fundamental rethink and shift in the mindset is most needed.

We cannot continue to promote unsustainable business-as-usual projects such as mega-reclamation projects all over

the country, that are not only grossly expensive but also destroy invaluable fishery resources and marine biodiversity irreversibly. All the sand-mining and attendant environmental consequences cannot simply be mitigated away, as it causes permanent damage to ecosystems that cannot be replaced.

The business-as-usual approach has to change. Some critical areas where priority must be given are in the following.

First, we must take on climate change seriously and ensure greater ambition and action as regards mitigation, adaptation and efforts at addressing loss and damage. We welcome the recent government initiatives to step up climate action including through the establishment of the Malaysia Climate Change Action Council, as well as in embarking on climate legislation, and for a National Adaptation Plan. These positive initiatives should be expedited with urgency and climate change is mainstreamed into all levels of government, from the federal, state to local levels, including in our education system.

Second, we need to urgently tackle the related issues of forest and soil conservation, river management, flood prevention and mitigation, and ensuring enough water supply, in an integrated manner. Forests and trees are the foundation of ecology, water supply and management and biodiversity. The chopping of forests, especially in hills, either for logging, plantations or commercial projects, should be stopped or drastically reduced as it has gone too far. Recent measures to make available funds for forests protection, conservation and rehabilitation from the federal to the states are welcome but once again, these efforts too must be expedited. SAM is however gravely concerned about the promotion of carbon offset projects involved in forests conservation efforts, through the engagement of corporate interests. Experiences abroad have shown negative impacts especially on local communities and indigenous peoples. We must learn from such experiences and avoid them.

The third priority is the control of pollution and toxic products, chemicals and wastes. We have experienced serious cases of air and water pollution. The Sungai Kim Kim and the Klang Valley water disruption are grim reminders of what toxins in the environment can do to the health of the public. While recent efforts by the Ministry of Environment and Water are laudable, including in seeking the cooperation of the police and armed forces in beefing up enforcement efforts, much more needs to be done in pollution prevention especially over our water resources.

It is indeed high time for a single, independent federal authority accountable to Parliament, whose sole duty should be to look after the country's rivers, including in ensuring that the water catchments and rivers which are in the states, are properly protected and the water resources properly managed.

While the Environmental Quality Act is currently being reviewed and improved, we do need an enhanced Environmental Protection Act which addresses the weaknesses of the previous legislation, including in relation to regulations on environmental impact assessments.

Fourth, there has been a big push recently for the revival of the mining industry in the country, including in the extraction of rare earths, with efforts for a national plan to transform the mining industry. Although there are assurances from the federal level that such mining will not take place in environmentally sensitive areas, our concern is that it is probably in these areas where such resources exist, given the nation's previous history of mining and extraction. The notion of 'sustainable' mining is an oxymoron. Dealing with toxic, hazardous and radioactive wastes for generations to come are not where we should be heading.

Once again, there will be a competition between economic and environmental imperatives, with the latter usually being sacrificed in favour of profits for the industry.

We cannot go on making such trade-offs. It is about time we realised that we have reached the limits of what Mother Earth can take, and if we continue to ignore these warning signs and limits, we will face environmental calamities which will be hugely costly, both in human and economic terms.

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