



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பினாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109
email: consumerofpenang@gmail.com

Websites:
www.consumer.org.my

Letter to the Editor

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It Costs the Earth: Calculate the True Costs now or Perish

The pandemic we are facing is becoming endemic, meaning that it may stay with us forever (hopefully in a more controllable and less virulent form). And we will have to learn to live with nature and its many furies. We are a part of nature, NOT apart from nature.

We think we are humankind and have become very arrogant about our cleverness and our abilities to do so many things without thinking about what effects we bring onto nature and the other fellow inhabitants on earth. These include the invisible viruses and bacteria, which by the way, are much more abundant (higher biomass) than all the animals (including humans) put together. Plants have the highest biomass.

Man's dominance over nature has brought havoc to nature and our lives, bringing irreparable damage and destruction and we continue to do so. Mainly by the capitalistic logic of greed, growth, expansion, accumulation, competition, progress, speed, domination, control and so on, which we have imbibed as the norm. And many of us see it as the only way to move forward as an individual or humanity.

We are always looking towards more growth and progress as imagined by the rich and powerful who set the legal, ideological, economic, political, enforcement and other frameworks which define what we can/should do and cannot/should not do.

As Frederic Bastiat, the 19th century French economist and philosopher, said, "When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men in a society over the course of time they create for themselves a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it". The same applies to the systems that were developed to benefit the few who have managed to glorify these systems which have become the norm in our modern societies. That is one of the reasons why inequalities worsen all the time.

And most of us have been made to become consumers, to consume what comes out of the ever-expanding factories, by the capitalists, industrialists, entrepreneurs, policy makers and of course the economists, who think within the framework of GDP, growth, progress and the externalisation of environmental costs. Nature has always been conveniently casted away and externalised, not added to as a real cost. Too immeasurable, difficult to calculate, and more likely that the benefits of the factory produce or proposal may not look good at all, or worse look negative. Very much like advertising where only the positive sides are shown - where often outrageous and untruthful claims are made, whereas the negative side effects are hidden.

It is time we looked at the true costs of environmental and natural destruction that we are facing now and at a stage which may have become irreversible.

Look at plastic pollution, countries externalise the problem by shipping and exporting the waste to

far-away nations, but it still comes back to them as microparticles in the Alps or Arctic. They are everywhere, we are all breathing and eating it. We are creating a circle of poison surrounding us.

Or the food production problem, we are simply eating rubbish and poisons. We poison our food with pesticides, weedicides and other post harvest chemicals. We beautify and preserve them with chemical colourings, flavourings and preservatives. And let them stay edible for months and allow them to travel for thousands of food miles. I wonder whether all the health and environmental costs which are tremendous are factored in? It is no wonder that the most developed countries have the highest cancer rates.

According to FAO's report "Natural Capital Impacts in Agriculture" the external costs of global production of maize, rice, soybean and wheat are 1.7 times higher than the product value. On top of that, the value of ecosystem services associated with farming can be substantial. In 2012 the estimated value of production from Japanese agriculture was 9.5 trillion Yen while the value of the ecosystem services was estimated to be 8.2 trillion Yen, i.e. almost as much as the production value.

Or the antibiotic load that our animal livestock is given. 70-80% of the world's antibiotics are given to animals, not to prevent or cure disease but mainly as a growth promoter. This has rendered most of our antibiotics ineffective. And new antibiotics are created not fast enough to replace the ineffective ones. The last resort antibiotics are also more toxic and dangerous. We are facing a situation which could lead to an end of modern medicine. Where a simple cut may kill us as we cannot heal it and we die from it, while operations, cancer treatments and other procedures which need antibiotics cannot be done. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria are now in the community, just like COVID 19 viruses. Cheap meat, anyone?

Governments also enable private influences over public choices. The now favourite electric car was killed in 1999 when General Motors stopped the production of its electric vehicle, the EVI. It was designed to comply with the clean-air mandate of California. But then it was killed by lawsuits from the George W. Bush administration, the carmakers and the oil industry. This is so clear when big corporate or private interests lobby governments for projects that are clearly detrimental to the environment and public interests. In Penang, we have the Penang South Reclamation project touted by the State Government as the way to progress despite fishermen, public groups and politicians from different ends of the spectrum voicing concern over the destruction of fisheries and the environment and how the project will burden Penangites with huge debts and benefitting the private developers.

In Malaysia with the COVID-19 pandemic escalating and climate change looming over us, millions of consumers faced many other environmental problems. The water and toxic fumes pollution in Sungai Kim Kim in Pasir Gudang grabbed the headlines, poisoning and hospitalising thousands. Then Selangor had similar bouts of water pollution affecting millions of consumers and at the same time had flash floods which made the famous Masjid Jamek seem to float in the flood waters.

Our cities are getting hotter due to the lack of greens and climate change causing the heat island effect. A study undertaken by Think City showed that temperatures in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Bahru and Ipoh rose respectively by 1.64°C, 6.37°C, 6.7°C and 6.75°C over a number of years.

The logging and destruction of the forests continue both for timber and for projects like Musang King durian plantations in Kedah and Pahang, threatening the livelihoods of villagers and the Orang Asli. There was also illegal logging, 16 of the 37 permanent forest reserves in Kelantan had been encroached upon by illegal loggers in over 5 years.

It is high time that we do something good for the Earth now. Our preoccupation with “materialism equals happiness” only breeds destruction for Mother Earth and brings us destruction, ill health and unhappiness. We are not saving the Earth but saving ourselves. The Earth doesn’t need us but we need the Earth for all the life-giving nourishment, healing power, lessons and beauty it gives us.

We need to consume less, be less wasteful and tread carefully on Earth. Together we will have to re-imagine our lives to be more beautiful, caring and luxuriant, respecting and honouring the gifts of Mother Earth.

It is time for us to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean.

Mohideen Abdul Kader
President
Consumers Association of Penang (CAP)