



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to the Editor

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CAP Calls for Stronger Enforcement and Policy Reforms to Protect Malaysia's Rivers

Malaysia is rich in water resources with around 98% of our water needs coming from rivers and streams. Unfortunately, many individuals and entities neglect the care of our rivers, resulting in severe pollution issues. The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) demands urgent and immediate action from the government to enforce existing environmental laws, prevent industrial activities near rivers, and implement stringent policies that target pollution at its source.

According to the Environmental Quality Report 2023, out of the 672 rivers monitored, 25 (4%) were polluted, 161 (24%) were slightly polluted, and 486 (72%) showed good water quality. In general, the decrease in river water quality recorded in 2023 was attributed to an increase in the pollution load on the river from point sources and nonpoint sources. Despite various government efforts, our rivers continue to be polluted. Instead of relying on constant clean-up projects, focusing on protection and conservation would be cheaper and more effective in the long run.

Recently the Ministry of Energy Transition and Water Transformation (PETRA) was quoted by media stating that the Special Committee to Address the Deterioration of River Water Quality (JKKAS) through the National Water Research Institute of Malaysia, will spearhead the Working Committee to Identify New Types of Pollutants. The National Water Council meeting has also agreed on the need to establish a working committee to examine the threat of water pollution in Malaysia by involving all stakeholders to ensure that the problem can be dealt with immediately.

The formation of this new committee dedicated to identifying emerging pollutants and developing policies to strengthen administration related to new types of pollutants in the nation's water sources is a commendable initiative. While understanding the types of pollutants affecting our waterways is crucial, addressing the root causes of the pollution is essential for providing the long-term protection our rivers desperately need. Thus, our current approach must evolve to prioritise prevention, enforcement, and stringent policies that address pollution at its source.

The ongoing pollution issues highlight a critical spatial planning and enforcement gap. Although environmental regulations exist, they would be effective only if enforced stringently. Inaction or delayed responses from authorities allow polluters to continue harmful practices with little fear of consequences.

Approximately 50 cases of river pollution were reported in Selangor this year. According to the Selangor Public Health and Environmental Exco, Jamaliah Jamaluddin, enforcement of the amended LUAS Enactment that provided for heavier penalties had succeeded in reducing water pollution cases compared to the year 2023¹. The amended LUAS 1999 Enactment of 2020 included mandatory imprisonment, increasing fines from a maximum of RM100,000 to a minimum of RM200,000 and up to RM1 million for unlicensed water source pollution. The LUAS Enactment also requires offenders to cover all costs incurred by LUAS for remediation.

Rivers are often part of primary water catchments, floodplains, or biodiverse ecosystems and thus are environmentally sensitive areas (ESAs). These areas are critical for sustaining the natural environment and maintaining clean water resources. Pollution load, which refers to the quantity and concentration of pollutants introduced into a water body over a specific period, is a critical factor in determining the health of rivers.

The riverbed plays a significant role in managing the pollution load as a natural filter to trap sediments and pollutants. However, industrial activities including the operation of factories near rivers, continue unabated. This proximity is a significant risk factor for river water pollution, as untreated or inadequately treated effluents can easily be discharged into rivers, degrading water quality and endangering human health and the ecosystem.

Deforestation is another critical factor that significantly contributes to river water pollution. The removal of natural vegetation destabilizes the soil, leading to increased erosion and runoff, which carry sediments and harmful substances into rivers. To protect our water resources, it is essential to halt deforestation and promote reforestation efforts, ensuring that these natural buffers remain intact to filter pollutants and stabilize the environment.

To combat river pollution effectively, it is crucial to implement comprehensive planning and zoning. Proper zoning ensures that sensitive river ecosystems are protected from industrial and commercial activities that could cause pollution. Proper planning of areas for different types of land use can prevent high-risk activities from taking place near rivers, reducing the likelihood of pollutants entering our water bodies. Zoning also supports the establishment of riparian buffer zones, where natural vegetation can help filter runoff before it enters the river, further protecting water quality.

Improving waste management is vital to reducing pollution. Effective waste management ensures that waste is properly collected, treated, and disposed of. Thus, minimising the risk of pollutants entering water bodies. Furthermore, pollution prevention efforts, such as restricting the use of agrochemicals, can address issues at their source.

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) urges the government to take immediate action to strengthen enforcement, revise policies, and implement preventive measures. By combining these efforts, we can safeguard our rivers and ensure cleaner water for future generations.

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¹Selangor affected 50 cases of water source pollution. 2024, July 28
<https://wilayah.com.my/selangor-affected-50-cases-of-water-source-pollution/>