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WATER MANAGEMENT: Use water wisely like S'pore

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THERE is talk about water rationing, but for my family and me, our neighbourhood in Selangor has been experiencing water rationing from as early as February.

The water to our home is often turned off in the mornings and remains as such until after midnight. We sometimes experience water rationing as long as 12 to 15 hours in a day.

Our situation has now worsened during this dry and hot weather. Whenever water to our home is turned on, the water that comes out of our taps has a low pressure.

Most Malaysians are naïve about the scarcity and value of water. For some people, politics has taken priority over science, such as in the case of Selangor's water supply.

Although Earth comprises 70 per cent water, only 0.6 per cent of our planet's water is directly usable by us. Malaysia may have abundant annual rainfall of between 2,000 and 3,000mm, but our rainfall is not constant throughout the year. There are months of dry weather.

The largest consumer of water worldwide is the agriculture sector, which consumes 85 per cent of total water in the world. Malaysia uses 1.7 million litres of water per second to grow crops.

Selangor uses 0.13 million litres of water per second to grow crops.

This amount of water is equivalent to 20 per cent, or one-fifth, of Selangor's rainfall.

Moreover, this amount of water does not include the amount of water required in the processing and other downstream agricultural activities.

To produce 1kg of oil palm bunch in Malaysia requires 500 litres of water. And to extract and process the oil from the oil palm bunches would require an additional 4,000 litres of water to produce 1kg of palm oil.

Consequently, a lion's share of Selangor's rainfall goes to the farming and the agriculture industries, with the leftover used by other economic sectors and domestic users.

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Perhaps Malaysians and our authorities should look at Singapore, which is regarded by some as the world leader in urban water management.

In 2009, Malaysians consumed more than 300 litres of water per capita per day, which is more than double that recommended by the United Nations (between 140 and 150 litre per capita per day).

Our daily water consumption rises at a rate of about eight litres per capita every year.

At this rate, Malaysia will have nearly no water reserves left by 2025.

In contrast, Singaporeans' daily water consumption dropped by 1.3 litres per capita every year to reach 155 litres per capita per day in 2010.

Furthermore, Singapore aims to reduce its daily water consumption to 140 litres per capita by 2030.

Unlike Malaysians, who treat water as a low-value commodity, Singaporeans view water as their nation's lifeblood: a precious resource to be cleaned, harvested and recycled.

Water runoff from two-thirds of Singapore's land area is funnelled to water supply systems.

Changi Airport, for example, has facilities to harvest rainwater and collect runoff.

Marina Barrage collects water runoff from a land area nearly the size of Tioman Island.

Singapore also boasts of having the lowest water leakages in the world. On average, the world loses 25 to 40 per cent of water through leakages in the water distribution network. Malaysia loses 36 per cent of its water through leakages. Singapore loses only five per cent.

Where the Selangor government indirectly encourages water wastage by giving its citizens free water (up to 20 cubic meters), Singapore has taken the message to save water to the nation's youngsters. Messages to promote the saving and protection of water and rivers are taken to schools and teenagers in Singapore through mascots and lifestyle eco-magazines.

Singapore has become an example for Malaysia and the world on wise water management.

In its aspiration to become totally self-sufficient in freshwater by 2060, Singapore has moved to treat and manage its freshwater.

The biggest slap for Malaysia will be when Malaysia experiences frequent and prolonged dry taps, but Singapore, in contrast, achieves its ambition of water self-reliance. Perhaps then Malaysians will wake up.



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