

Sep 16, 2016 | Written by Lillian Wee | 0



This article first appeared in *Special Report, The Edge Malaysia Weekly*, on August 29 - September 4, 2016.

IN September last year, Southeast Asia was struck by arguably the worst haze of the decade. The episode, which saw schools closed, annual marathons cancelled and long lines at neighbourhood clinics, had the public shrouded in panic. Face mask sales soared as the nation experienced frustration and rising cases of asthma.

The haze is a phenomenon we are regrettably familiar with. Skies become a blanket of smog while we painstakingly squint to catch sight of signboards and pedestrians.

With their palms held over their noses and mouths, people scurry to purchase face masks while web searches on the Air Pollution Index go through the roof. The scene is a forlorn one, like a dystopian movie set made for a Stephen King adaptation.

According to an annual report by the Asean Peatland Forests Project (APFP) and Global Environment Centre (GEC), more than 500,000 people in Southeast Asia were affected by respiratory illnesses last year as a result of 1.6 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere in just two months. The staggering figure surpasses Japan's annual emission from all industrial sources.

There is a lot we do not know about the haze — the root of the problem and why we do not seem to learn from past mistakes. As a result, Malaysia remains stuck in a blame game.

"We recognise that the haze is the most serious environmental problem we have in this region and the root cause is the degradation of peat swamp forests and uncontrolled burning," says Faizal Parish, director of GEC, a non-governmental, non-profit organisation that works on environmental issues at a global level.

Formed in 1998 after the catastrophic haze, Parish has spent 18 years with the organisation trying to bring together multiple stakeholders to address global environmental issues, particularly the haze in Southeast Asia.

"I remember my son was very young at the time and that year, with the haze, he hardly put on weight. He was sick all the time. He had asthma. And that is really seeing first-hand the real impact on people," he says.

Speaking to Parish, we learn that Indonesia — as we often think as the culprit of the haze — is not the only country with peat swamp forests that are susceptible to fire. Malaysia has an estimated

2,588,900ha of peatlands — the second largest area in Southeast Asia after Indonesia. That means peat fires happen in our backyard too.

“In 1983, Kuala Lumpur was shrouded in smoke and the haze came from Johor. There was this vast land clearing, but everyone seemed to blame someone else, saying that it had ‘nothing to do with us’,” Parish recalls.

Peat or profit?

Peat, which is the first step in the formation of coal, is carbon-rich soil created from partially decomposed vegetation accumulated over several millennia. Peatlands are typically saturated with water and are virtually impossible to set alight. However, when they are cleared and drained to make way for cash crops and development, they become arid and vulnerable to fire.

Last year, two million hectares of peatlands in Southeast Asia were burnt and destroyed, according to data from GEC. Between 2000 and 2010, Malaysia lost 557,000ha or 45.3% of its peatlands.

“Peat is the only terrestrial system able to make fossil fuels. But we are interrupting the process by burning them. Coal takes 300 million years to form. I guess you could wait around,” says Parish.

He adds that burning peat also causes devastating harm to natural habitats. Mushrooms, flowers and huge pitcher plants uniquely adapted to the environment disappear into the ashes.

Peat swamp forests serve as an ideal habitat for animals such as the orangutan. But just outside this refuge lies a different scenery: regimented rows of spiky oil palm trees spread out for miles on end.

From an orangutan’s point of view, this vista presents an uninhabitable landscape. But from an industry standpoint, it is the prospect of burgeoning revenue.

According to the US Department of Agriculture and the World Bank, the global market for palm oil and palm kernel was estimated at about US\$47 billion in 2014. Data from the Malaysian Palm Oil Council shows that palm oil revenue amounted to RM60.17 billion last year.

Today, more and more peat swamp forests are being drained and cleared for development and highways, says Parish. “The corporate sector, particularly those in property development, need to wake up and stop grabbing land with their eyes closed just because they think it is cheap.”

Sowing seeds through partnerships

It might seem daunting to deal with such issues, but many hands make light work. Parish has teamed up with BOH Plantations Sdn Bhd CEO Carolyn Russell to create awareness among the communities who live near fire-risk areas along the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve (KLNFR).

Russell has seen first-hand the effects of ruinous peat swamp forests. This comes as no surprise as the KLNFR, which originally had about 1,000ha of peat swamp, is located next to BOH’s Bukit Cheeding tea garden.

According to her, the forest reserve lost 300ha of peatlands in 2012 and 2014 — almost a third of the forest. “Despite preventive and conservation efforts by the local authorities, we have seen significant loss of the KLNFR peatlands. Being a ‘neighbour’, we want to protect the forest reserve’s pivotal role in our ecosystem,” says Russell.

Passionate about educating the public on the importance of peat swamp forests and their connection to the haze, Parish is working with Russell to disseminate useful information to people who reside near the KLNFR. The partnership’s recent endeavour featured an Eco Trail, which was held at the

Bukit Cheeding tea garden. Some 600 participants had the opportunity to experience a natural peat swamp forest and understand the threats it faces.

“For many, it was an eye-opener. They began to realise the uniqueness of the peatland forest, to appreciate the rare flora and to know that everyone must assume personal responsibility to protect it,” says Russell.

The event managed to raise RM28,000, which will be used to further develop effective and sustainable methods to keep high-risk areas in check and to educate locals on the dos and don'ts of managing peat swamp forests. “It is not an easy task,” says Parish. But he believes that in the long run, their efforts will pay off.

The first step begins by mapping out fire-risk areas in the vicinity and training local volunteers to conduct daily fire checks and reports. This effort is supported by a close connection with district councils, the forestry department and landowners.

Fire-fighting equipment was donated to the Bukit Cheeding village to empower residents in putting out fires. Workshops for indigenous communities and landowners were conducted to help facilitate a discourse on peat swamp forests among the various stakeholders.

The second step focuses on education. The Forest Ranger Programme is a framework developed to engage elders within the Orang Asli community to teach in schools the importance of peatland conservation.

“We are looking at how the programme can work with, strengthen and support the traditional values of the Orang Asli — the stewards of forests — and help them in their desire to keep the forests of the future,” says Parish.

Billboards are used to remind road users about the vulnerability of peatland forests. It is hoped that an image of how a simple misstep could lead to catastrophic danger would encourage more people to take precautions.

“We can inadvertently cause forest fires with a simple act of throwing a cigarette out of the car window. Now is the time for the public to step up and play a role in preventing accidental fires,” says Russell.

For better or worse?

Our rivers and drains clog up, we copiously cough amid open fires, flash floods plague our cities, causing jams to last for hours, and another mixed-use development springs up in an already dense neighbourhood. Parish says almost disconcertingly, “We see all these happening and yet, ‘it is never my fault, it is someone else’s fault’.”

Peat without the haze, just as a cause without its effect, becomes a very abstract thing. But when we relate a cause to a direct impact, says Parish, a story can be formed — one that he envisions will empower change in individuals.

Peat constitutes 8% of land area in Malaysia. Parish and Russell point out that it is a significant number and hope that the private sector and individuals recognise that they have an important role to play in preserving it.

“Peat [and the environment in which we live] can either be a goldmine or a time bomb. And we have less gold and more bombs. We have to realise that,” says Parish.

Addthis:

author: Lillian Wee
source: The Edge Malaysia
is Pinning adv:
Edge TV:



An Indonesian soldier checks on peatland near Palangkaraya, central Kalimantan, Indonesia

Video Priority: Neutral

Source URL: <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/my/article/special-reportmaking-malaysia-bettersoot-sweat-and-tears>

Links:

[1] <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/my/..video-photo/behindthestory/293561>

[2] <http://www.theedgemarkets.com/my/..video-photo/recentuploads>