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Raising awareness of need to appreciate our rivers, keep them clean

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THE transformation of Sungai Raga from a dirty river that no one had heard of, into the beauty it is today is a truly amazing one.

Amazing not just because the river is now crystal clear and the water good enough to drink, but also because 156 families in a village in Yan, Kedah made that transformation possible.

The six-kilometre Sungai Raga, with its source in the forest reserves in the foothills of Gunung Jerai, was rehabilitated four years ago under the "Love Your River" campaign.

The national campaign, organised by the Department of Irrigation and Drainage, was introduced in 1993 to raise consciousness among Malaysians on the need to appreciate rivers and keep them free from pollution.

The main programme under this campaign is the river-adoption scheme where a Village Security and Development Committee, school or district, under the gotong-royong concept, selects a river for maintenance.

When the programme began, there were 73 rivers under this scheme and this number grew to 160 last year as more schools and village committees took to the idea of river rehabilitation.

Abdul Razak Mohd Noor, senior engineer of DID's River Engineering Department who has been in charge of the programme since its inception, says there have been stories of both success and failure.

He added, however, that the main factor that decided the fate of a river rehabilitation project was whether the members of a village committee or school could work as a team.

Abdul Razak said DID only acted as a catalyst explaining the programme to the people and getting them excited about it. The decision to take up the challenge and make the programme work was entirely in the hands of the people.

In the case of Sungai Raga, he said, they were fortunate that there was more consensus than politicking among village committee members where the latter were able to garner and maintain the support needed to make Sungai Raga a three time winner at the national level.

He also cited the example of a school in Baling that had the support not only of teachers and students, but also of parents who would take time off to join their children in gotong-royong work, although it was not required of them.

Abdul Razak and another long-serving engineer on the project Razak Rashid believe that the campaign has been successful in raising awareness of the need for clean rivers.

However, Razak Rashid points to a 1996 survey by the Kedah DID which shows that although 95 per cent of 8,700 people surveyed said clean rivers were important, almost 42 per cent felt that the dirty work of cleaning up was the Government's responsibility.

Clearly, it is one thing getting the public to see the importance of clean rivers and quite another to get them involved. Even in Kedah, where most of the winning rivers are located, the job of convincing the public has not been an easy one.

Kedah DID deputy director K.J. Abraham said it took quite a while and a lot of convincing before many village committees took to the idea.

There were also no takers for some rivers that were up for adoption because they were just a little too far away from any village or school.

Another pressing problem the three officers raised was that most of the

rivers being "watched" and maintained under the adoption scheme were rural ones. The only urban rivers adopted for rehabilitation are the odd few in Johor and one in Seremban.

With a limited number of officers who are already pulled in too many directions, and with limited funds, DID faces an uphill task of caring for the larger portion of the nation's urban rivers.

Here they point to a need for greater contribution from the private sector as urban rivers are more polluted and need more funds, time and attention.

Besides, they said, the urban public's response to the river adoption scheme has been very poor and this group cannot be depended upon for the kind of collective action seen in the rural areas.

There is also a greater need for co-ordination and co-operation between several State and Federal authorities that have jurisdiction over rivers and related matters.

This is a problem DID hopes will be solved by the setting up of a centralised River Authority in every State as proposed by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently.

Greater political will is also essential for the future of rivers and this means a clear allocation of duties and responsibilities and the Government holding the responsible bodies to their word.

There should not be anymore finger-pointing when things go wrong.

Despite having the odds stacked against it, the department soldiers on spurred by success stories like that of Sungai Raga.

Kedah itself has much to be proud of with two village committees and several schools having won national titles.

Said Abdul Razak: "All States have done well but Kedah has been a shining example because it was the will of the people that made such a great difference here.

"It stands as a sign that anything can be achieved if the people put their minds to it.

Abraham, however, warns that too much euphoria over the wins may distract us from the fact that many rivers in the country are still badly polluted and in dire need of rehabilitation.

As part of long-term plans to boost education efforts, the State DID has approached the Education Department asking for a lesson on river cleanliness to be taught in classrooms every year.

They are willing to provide the materials free of charge and have offered to train teachers on the subject if required.

Meanwhile, the river that changed the lives of Kampung Raga folk continues to attract tourists every day. With it comes much need money for families still in the Special Programme for the Hardcore Poor, for their children's education and for the development of the village.

One member of the Village Committee for the River Adoption Scheme, Tahir Ahmad said: "We never realised how important the environment was and the river never meant anything to us but now the view of the whole kampung has changed.

"What we gave to the river - all our efforts, the river has given back to us."

If only this was the attitude of all Malaysians.

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