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River authority to help keep our waterways clean

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Government will set up a national river authority to oversee cleaning, maintenance and beautification, and promote agrotourism of waterways throughout the nation.

Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud said the river authority, like those operating in developed countries such as Britain, would help the respective State Governments fully utilise their rivers while keeping pollution at bay.

"Our waterways are still under-utilised. I have been asked by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to find ways to realise the potential of our rivers," he told the New Straits Times today.

He said he had already directed the Drainage and Irrigation Department to prepare proposals for the setting up of the river authority and the functions it would undertake.

The matter, he said, would be discussed in depth at a meeting with Dr Mahathir on Wednesday.

"Dr Mahathir himself has suggested a few ideas like building locks for small waterways to make it navigable such as at London's Camden Locks," Dr Sulaiman said.

The Camden Locks are part of a series of locks designed to maintain a certain depth to make the canal in north London navigable by small and medium-sized boats.

The locks can be operated by boat operators to allow them smooth passage through the more than 10km of canals that is one of the popular tourist attractions in the British capital.

Dr Sulaiman said among the suggestions was to have orchards or plant crops like maize along river banks as agrotourism attractions.

He said the Ministry was also looking into developments such as restaurants along river banks, such as along Thailand's Chao Praya river, as part of the efforts to utilise the nation's waterways.

He cited the Selangor, Pahang, Perak and Sarawak rivers as the waterways with the most potential for such developments and thus among the river authority's initial targets.

In 1995, it was reported that Malaysia was still far behind some countries in terms of river maintenance and still in the "very initial stage" of adopting a systematic and integrated effort to do so.

DID (river division) director Ahmad Fuad Embi said apart from flood prevention programmes, there was no other integrated management programmes for rivers.

He said there was a lot to be done on the nation's waterways such as being done in developed countries like Japan and Britain.

Britain, Ahmad Fuad said, had formed a national river authority and had adopted eight strategies to maintain and look after its rivers.

These are catchment management plan, pollution control management, abstraction and water resources control, fisheries management, monitoring programme, flood defence activities, conservation of rivers programme and navigational control.

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