

More people means less water

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PUTRAJAYA: The water available for each person will be greatly reduced due to a growing population and the country's march towards developed nation status.

More water will be used as the quality of life improves and urbanisation and industrialisation increases.

Drainage and Irrigation Department director-general Datuk Dr Keizrul Abdullah warned that Malaysia would face serious environmental threats a decade from now, including severe and frequent flash floods as well as prolonged droughts, especially during El Nino years.

Conflicts of water and land use, decreasing crop yields, pollution, outbreaks of water-borne diseases, declining aquatic biodiversity, deforestation and uncontrolled erosion as well as sedimentation are just some of the challenges.

In his paper entitled "Flood and Drought Management in Malaysia", which was presented at the National Seminar on Socio-Economic Impact of Extreme Weather and Climate Change here, Keizrul said flooding was the most significant natural hazard in the country in terms of the number of people and areas affected, frequency, duration and socio-economic damages.

"Having 189 river basins throughout Malaysia, the rivers and their corridors of flood plains fulfil a variety of functions both for human use and for the natural ecosystem where they are a fundamental part of the natural, economic and social system.

"At the same time, rivers might be the largest threat to the entire corridor areas," he said.

Malaysia, he noted, had experienced 15 major floods since 1920.

The most severe was in 1971, which hit Kuala Lumpur and many other states, resulting in a loss of more than RM200 million and the death of 61 people.

Keizrul said the floods in Johor earlier this year was considered the most costly disaster, resulting in an estimated loss of RM1.5 billion.

He said in recent years, rapid development within catchment areas had also resulted in a higher run-off and deteriorated river capacity.

This, he said, had in turn resulted in an increase in flood frequency and magnitude.



Datuk Dr Keizrul Abdullah says Malaysia will face serious environmental threats a decade from now

Keizrul said from 1971 to 2000, Malaysia had spent RM1.6 billion on structural flood mitigation measures. Another RM1.8 billion was spent from 2001 to 2005.

He said under the Ninth Malaysia Plan, the allocation for structural flood control works had escalated to RM3.8 billion.

"It is estimated that the cost of future river improvement and flood mitigation works for the next 15 years will amount to more than RM17 billion," he said.

On droughts, Keizrul said as Malaysia was within the heavy rainfall region, the possibility of a serious drought was much less compared to other countries.

In his paper, Keizrul suggested that the development of policies, strategies and action plans to overcome flood and drought should be based on a comprehensive approach and should consider a wide range of mitigating factors.

He said there was a need for appropriate institutions and legislation to deal with problems associated with flood and drought management.

Under the country's constitution, matters pertaining to water, rivers, land and forest come under the jurisdiction of state governments while the gazetting of catchment areas is under the purview of the federal government.

This, he said, caused problems as initiatives to gazette catchment areas by federal agencies fail to get the support of state agencies.

"This may be partly due to the fact that the water catchment areas are providing state governments with much of their state revenue, such as from logging and industrial or township development."

He said unless the matter was resolved, it would complicate flood and drought management.