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By YUEN MEIKENG  
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

# Time to get our Act together

The floods Malaysia is experiencing now will only get worse due to climate change, emphasising the urgent need to introduce the proposed Climate Change Act.

THE floods are here again.

Rising waters have forced thousands of people from their homes and into relief centres in Kelantan, Terengganu and parts of Johor. Heavy downpours also shut down the Lawas Airport in northern Sarawak after the runway was flooded on Thursday.

A climate change expert tells *Sunday Star* that things are only set to get more intense in the near future, thanks to rising temperatures caused by climate change.

"Storms are expected to become stronger, while rainfall will be heavier and last longer," says Dr Renard Siew, climate change adviser at the Centre for Governance and Political Studies.

The current wet weather is due to the north-east monsoon wind that blows from November to March every year. But because of warmer weather conditions, the winds hold more water vapour nowadays, explains Siew. This leads to heavier rain and more severe flooding.

"Kelantan and Terengganu are very vulnerable because they are situated in low-lying areas near the coast.

"I'm estimating that extreme weather patterns will get worse with time.

"We are already on the trajectory of achieving an increase in temperature of 4°C if we don't do anything about it now," he adds.

The United Nations Environment Programme report released last month says, going by the way the world's emissions have been increasing, we could have temperature increases of nearly 4°C by 2100.

Siew says climate change has increased the likelihood of extreme weather patterns such as floods, droughts and forest fires.

"Extreme weather patterns used to only cover about 0.1% of Earth's surface between the 1950s and 1980s. But that number has gone up to 14.5% in the period between 2005 and 2017," he says.

On the flip side, Malaysia also has another extreme weather phenomenon, namely drought, points out Siew.

"Prolonged droughts affect our crop yields, especially palm oil, because female flowers don't bloom when there's not enough water.

"Drought also causes water levels in dams to fall. We experienced that during the water crisis in Selangor," he says.

In 2014, the water in dams in Selangor dropped to critical levels following dry weather, leading to water rationing to take place and affecting 6.7 million residents.

At present, Malaysia has more hot days compared with 10 years ago, and they're hotter, too. Based on news reports, major cities in Malaysia are seeing more days when temperatures hit at least 32°C.



**Floods, again:** Floods are such a regular occurrence at Taman Sungai Rambai in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, that there is a floodwater marker in the area. This flood was in October this year. — MUSTAFA AHMAD/ The Star

Kuala Lumpur can expect such a temperature for 270 days in a year compared with 260 days a year a decade ago.

## Act-ing on climate change

With the current elements in play, experts agree that introducing a Climate Change Act in Malaysia is the right thing to do.

This is to ensure long-term governance is inculcated, says Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences senior research fellow Prof Datuk Dr Azizan Abu Samah.

"Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation can be regulated under this Act," he says.

He adds that mangrove conservation for coastal protection and conserving biodiversity can also be legislated.

"Right now, warming is already locked into the global climate system and as such, we cannot stop it. We are trying to arrest warming at 1.5°C, which I think isn't possible, so the next target is 2°C. Any increase higher than 2°C is expected to result in a drastic change of the status quo involving shifts in land use and migration," Prof Azizan says.

Because climate change is a global issue, no single country can solve it — it requires international cooperation.

"All countries need to help in whatever way possible to reduce carbon dioxide emissions so that we can at least control the expected global temperature rise to, at most, 2°C," he says.

Obviously, Malaysia's carbon emission is considered small compared with that of behemoths like China and India (the two most populous countries in the world) but Prof Azizan says we can do a lot more to cut down our carbon footprint.

"As a nation with a long coastline, we are prone to the impact of a sea level rise of 3.2mm a year, as estimated by the IPCC (United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change)," Prof Azizan points out.

Going by this estimate, the sea level rise is expected to be about 32cm to 50 cm by 2100.

"As such, we need to have proper zoning, especially for public buildings such as hospitals or schools, which should be located on higher ground," he says.

It has been reported that the Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change Ministry is studying the need for a Climate Change Act.

The aim of this law is reportedly to establish green actions in businesses and the private sector to tackle climate change.

Siew believes the Act should make it mandatory for companies to adhere to carbon emission-reducing targets. Proper reporting systems on emissions should be in place for companies to follow.

"But some leeway should be given for smaller, less mature companies. As it is now, I don't think many public listed companies are ready, so what more SMEs?" he says.

Malaysian Nature Society president Prof Dr Ahmad Ismail says similar laws should be introduced in neighbouring countries to combat climate change.

"An agreement with regional countries should be made to have joint efforts.

"Detailed studies on the causes of climate change, the technologies involved and local readiness are needed. Only then can rules and regulations be established," he adds.

## Small steps for big results

But while the Act remains elusive for now, ordinary Malaysians can act to slow down climate change by doing tiny, daily actions that add up to big results.

This includes little steps like switching off the lights when not in use and using public transportation as much as possible rather than driving.

"Don't think it isn't your problem. We all have a role to play," urges Siew.

He adds that Malaysians use more water than they should: an average of 210 litres a day, which is twice the recommended daily usage.

"We must start treating water and other resources like a commodity and not take it for granted.

"We continue to use it like it doesn't diminish.

"My worry is that one day, we may have to impose water sanctions similar to those in Tanzania."

An example of such sanctions is limiting people to five-minute showers or allowing only three minutes to do any washing.

"It is a scary state to live in, but it is a real possibility if we continue as we are," Siew says.

Recently, *The Star* reported on a YouGov poll in which 64% of the 1,101 Malaysian respondents said they are concerned about climate change, and that they had either experienced or are aware of the effects of the issue.

Only 5% believed that Malaysia is extremely prepared to deal with its effects.

Malaysians also need to be educated about the need to preserve our environment to tackle climate change effectively.

Prof Ahmad suggests that the government introduce continuous programmes for citizens to keep them aware about conserving the planet.

"More research and education is needed to support government commitments, policies and actions as well," he says.

While planting trees and cutting emissions can help, Malaysia also needs technology to help reduce our carbon footprint.

"The main sources of greenhouse gases are industries and motor vehicles through the burning of fossil fuels.

"The government should identify technologies that can help.

"Agencies with ecofriendly technologies should also step up to introduce such innovations," he adds.

Improving public transport will also go a long way towards cutting emissions, points out Prof Azizan.

"It will reduce congestion and traffic jams that encourages the emission of greenhouse gases," he says.