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Cruising down the Klang River

Once dubbed the dirtiest river in Malaysia, Sungai Klang may one day see river taxis ferrying people if current cleaning up efforts succeed.

THERE'S something about taking a river cruise that harkens back to a bygone age, when the only available transports were via railway horse-drawn carriages and river.

Before the internal combustion engine, rivers were the lifeblood of communities, not only providing water for sustenance and nourishment for crops, but also an essential transportation tool.

In present day Malaysia though, rivers no longer perform this key service. Yes, there are riverine systems that are used to move goods and people, but by and large rivers these days are no longer seen as a means of connectivity.

The most famous river (or infamous as the case may be) in the Klang Valley is Sungai Klang, which was dubbed the dirtiest in the country.

Growing up and moving around in Klang in the 70s and 80s meant getting to "seberang" or the other side, which meant crossing the river. This obviously did not mean getting on a sampan and rowing

across. It meant using Jambatan Kota, at one time the only bridge across the river (now there are three).

The running joke in Klang back then was if you wanted to commit suicide, you didn't need to jump off the bridge, all you needed to do was walk to the river's edge, where the noxious fumes emanating from the water would be sure to do you in.

I'm happy to note now that Sungai Klang is no longer Malaysia's most polluted - that dubious honour belongs to Sungai Tukang Batu, which is located in the Johor industrial town of Pasir Gudang.

Data from the Department of Environment's (DOE) Environmental Quality Report (EQR) 2017 shows that Sungai Tukang Batu has a Water Quality Index (WQI) reading of 30 - the worst among the 477 rivers nationwide whose water quality it tracks.

Sungai Tukang Batu is the only river listed in Class 5, meaning its water is so dirty that it is not suited

for use either to supply water or even for irrigation.

Sungai Klang used to be Class 5 but amazingly is now redesignated as Class 3, or moderately good water quality. How did this happen?

Klangites owe a debt of gratitude to the Selangor Maritime Gateway (SMG) project. SMG started two years ago with the aim of cleaning, rehabilitating and developing Sungai Klang. To date, SMG driver Landasan Lunayan has so far successfully cleared 50,000 tonnes of floating waste from the river. The Selangor government has committed RM45m to the project.

Cleaning operations continue, with SMG claiming that flora and fauna such as crocodiles are making the river their habitat, indicating that the river is capable of sustaining life.

I don't know anyone from the royal town that has seen one of these reptiles in the river. If you tell a Klangite this, you would probably be met with an incredulous look. It's hard to believe that there are fish in

the 120km-long river, let alone crocodiles.

But passing the river the other day I noticed a boat-like contraption near the Bandar Diraja Mosque. I learnt later that this was the Interceptor, the brainchild of Boyan Siat, the inventor and CEO of the Ocean Clean Up - an initiative that seeks to eradicate 80% of the ocean's plastics by starting at the roots - the rivers. His Interceptor, stationed at Sungai Klang, is the second of a pilot project to clean 1,000 of the world's most polluted rivers.

The use of the Interceptor is a collaboration between the Selangor state government and the Dutch government, headed by the project owner, SMG, to develop Sungai Klang.

Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Amirudin Shari believes that the clean-up of Sungai Klang is only the start.

"Developers can start designing properties that embrace the river as part of their overall plan, while businesses that already exist along

the river should start recognising the benefits of making the river your frontage to attract visitors and harness this advantage to create a new source of income," he was reported to have said.

Plans are also underway to introduce river taxis to Sungai Klang. All these, the Menteri Besar noted, will help enhance the area's tourism appeal as well as improve the income streams of fishing communities along the river.

I have travelled on river cruises on the Sarawak River in Kuching as well as Sungai Tembeling near Taman Negara, but getting on a water taxi in Sungai Klang will definitely be a highlight for this Klang boy.

The writer believes waterways benefit from initiatives like the Interceptor, but it is the attitude of Malaysians that are more important. Rehabilitation works can continue, but it will have limited impact if we continue to dump waste and abuse our rivers.