

Islamic view of river care

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World River Day has been held annually on the last Sunday of September in dozens of countries since 2005. It marks the commitment and enthusiasm of river conservationists to cultivate awareness of the need to protect and rehabilitate our water resources.

Recently, the government initiated the River of Life (ROL) Project, an Entry Point Project (EPP) of the Greater Kuala Lumpur/-Klang Valley national key economic area that aims to create a vibrant and livable waterfront along Sungai Klang. The project involves river cleaning, river master planning, and beautification, as well as river development.

The Islamic tradition is replete with the imagery of rivers, implying its significance to the Muslim psyche. In a hadith narrated by Ibn Majah, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) commented on the excessive use of water, even while performing ablution in a flowing river. In another hadith, the Prophet highlighted the similitude between those who perform the five daily prayers to someone who bathes in a river flowing in front of his house five times a day. During the auspicious event of Isra (the Night Journey), the Prophet was reported to have seen four rivers flowing out beneath the Great Tree below the Throne (Sidrath al-Muntaha), when the Archangel Gabriel informed him that the two hidden rivers were from Paradise, whereas the other two were the Nile and Euphrates.

Recognising the importance of rivers in the Muslim mind, it is pivotal to identify messages from the Islamic teachings that revolve around river protection and rehabilitation. We believe that river protection and rehabilitation are best presented via the framework of the higher Syariah objectives or maqasid.

This framework constitutes three main levels i.e. the essentials, exigencies, and enhancements that also encapsulate the five elements of religion, life, intellect, progeny and wealth at each level. Such a framework is important as it reflects purposeful, systemic, hierarchical, and pragmatic approaches of Islam to social issues and public policies.

Protection of religion with regard to river and water relates closely to the need to perform ablution for daily prayers and other acts of worship. At the level of exigencies, water is indispensable for hygiene and cleaning. At the enhancement level, riversides can become magnificent backgrounds and landscapes for mosques, beautifying their surroundings and infusing soothing effects for those who perform prayers therein.

Protection of life is impossible without water. Rivers and seas are the main sources of food and drinking water. The Quran highlights this life-giving quality of water: "And Allah has sent down the water from the sky and therewith gives life to the Earth

after death.” (Quran 16:65). At the exigency level, protection is extended to the different species of animals and plants, which in turn, also benefit humans in terms of food sustainability and balanced nutrition. Even the preservation of insects and algae is vital in sustaining rich bio-diversity and the cycle of life in a population. In a hadith, the Prophet said that there was a reward for serving any animate (living) being.

With regard to the human intellect, rivers provide man with scenery and ambiances that foster peace of mind. There are many scientific findings, including a recent one by Natural England last year, indicating that interacting with Nature reduces anxiety, stress and depression, and ultimately contributes to happiness. Rivers also provide nourishment and habitats for birds and other creatures. Rivers provide recreational spaces for humans to rest their minds and bodies, and improve their wellbeing.

River protection is essential to ensure inter-generational justice, so that future generations can enjoy natural resources of the same quality that we do or better. However, in some contexts, where overpopulation is the main contributing factor for river pollution and degradation, family planning can be considered one of the solutions at the exigency level of Islamic objectives.

At the enhancement level, it is important to promote rivers as national heritage and natural treasures collectively shared by all citizens across generations.

From the Islamic perspective, rivers are owned by the community as a whole. Therefore, no one has the right to claim exclusive ownership over them. The Prophet succinctly stressed that “people are partners in three things: water, pastures, and fire”. However, at the exigency level, allowing any party to have concessions over water supply management is permissible in Islam as long as no injustice is caused by imposing, for instance, unreasonable water tariffs.

Finally, rivers can become tourist attractions that provide economic benefits to local communities and the rest of the country, provided that their natural state and beauty are carefully preserved.

Given the conformity of river rehabilitation and protection with the overarching Syariah objectives, the Muslim community should support and become actively involved in this laudable initiative, as it is part and parcel of collective responsibility to their religion and the environment.

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