Heatwaves, one of the most underrated natural disasters

PRAY FOR RAIN: Until the weather returns to normal next month, there are many tips online on how to keep cool

In kindergarten, I remember singing this English nursery rhyme asking for the rain to “go away, come again another day, little Johnny wants to play”. In the Malay nursery rhyme ‘Bungau ok bungau, however, the frog calls for rain as a snake wants to eat it.

With the heatwave that we are currently facing, we would be more likely to sing (or in this case, pray) for the rain to come.

The average temperature here is 27°C, but, in the past month or so, temperatures have soared into the upper 30s. One can check the Meteorological Department’s website, where there is a banner with information on temperatures in 15 or so locations.

On Workers Day, for example, the highest temperature recorded was 37.9°C in Kuala Krai, Kelantan. The highest temperature ever recorded in Malaysia was 40.1°C in Perlis in 1998.

The Instaweather application on my iPhone tells me that the temperature may be, say, 33°C but it “feels like 42°C with 91% winds and humidity of 86 per cent”. I daresay that the information given is correct.

My mother used to tell us, “let there be no electricity but not water”, but she now feels otherwise in this current heatwave. There was one night when my brother and his two children slept...
in the car with the air conditioning running as there was a blackout in their Putrajaya apartment. He had to resort to that as his son was sitting for an examination the next day.

I, too, had checked into a hotel late one night when a fault at the Tenaga Nasional substation caused the entire Pantai Hill Park condominium to be without electricity. My concern then was not only the sweltering heat, but also the need to charge the batteries of my phones. In case of an emergency, I can easily be reached.

As temperatures have yet to exceed 40°C for seven days or more, the National Disaster Management Agency has yet to declare a heatwave emergency, but when it does, it will also announce emergency measures which, to this day, have yet to be specified. However, schools in some states have closed as temperatures exceeded 35°C.

While we do not know what our own emergency measures are (it could include cloud seeding, although Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Wilfred Madnis Tangau had said it may not be the most effective solution to the problems brought on by the El Nino phenomenon), there are enough tips on the Internet on how to look after yourself and your loved ones in this hot weather.

The Australian Red Cross, for example, recommends staying indoors in the coolest rooms of your house or in the shade during the hottest part of the day; wearing a hat and light-coloured, loose-fitting clothes, preferably made of natural fibres; wearing sunglasses and applying sunscreen with a sun protection factor of 30 to exposed skin; reducing heat from sunlight coming through the windows by using external shades or light-coloured curtains; ensuring sufficient air circulation either from an air conditioner, fan or by leaving a secured window or door open; taking cool showers and splashing yourself several times a day with cold water, particularly your face and the back of your neck; and, drinking water regularly even if you don’t feel thirsty.

In Australia, the Red Cross said extreme heat events have killed more people than bushfires, cyclones or any other natural disaster. Heatwaves are one of the most underrated natural disasters.

Of the top 10 Australian disasters of the past century, by the number of people killed, six of them were heatwaves. It can be dangerous for anyone, especially older people, young children and people with medical conditions.

But, there are times where we prefer sunny days than heavy rain, such as for wedding receptions at home where guests dine under tents in the open air. A rainy day will make it difficult for the host and guests. Furthermore, heavy rain can result in floods, which can lead to loss of properties and lives.

Malays have a ritual, not necessarily religious in nature, to stop the rain. I know of relatives who do one of these: sticking skewered shallots and chilies on a mound on the ground, or throwing the bride’s or groom’s clothes on the roof. Either those days were destined to be sunny and bright, or the rituals actually worked.

Another is engaging the services of a bomoh hujan or rain medium, not necessarily to stop the rain, but to shift it elsewhere, especially for big outdoor events.

Now, I do not believe in this, but I have seen with my own eyes how the sky at the Sepang Circuit was bright and sunny during the Formula 1 Grand Prix one particular year, while dark clouds were looming outside the circuit itself. It rained cats and dogs just after the race ended.

I remember someone making a remark on how efficient the bomoh hujan was that particular year. It was in 2012 that the Malaysian Grand Prix was red-flagged because of heavy rain.

The Meteorological Department says the hot weather is expected to return to normal beginning next month. There has now been rain and thunderstorms in the afternoon. God willing, we can soon look forward to cooler evenings and nights.

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