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Green Plan keeping S'pore in sync with nature

By Lee Poh Onn

THE recent MasterCard Worldwide report on the environmental vulnerability of cities ranked Singapore third-best among the 21 centres of commerce it surveyed.

Melbourne was first, followed by Johannesburg. Other Asian cities besides Singapore ranked as follows: Kuala Lumpur (9th), Bangkok (12th), Shanghai (13th), Shenzhen (15th), Beijing (17th), Jakarta (18th), New Delhi (20th, second last), and Mumbai (21st, last).

What is the significance of the report?

To begin with, it indicates that environmental considerations are becoming important for business entities, including credit card companies. Adequate water supplies, clean air and a good sewerage system matter in attracting businesses.

The report designated environmental factors under government control - such as water availability, potability, sewerage system, waste removal, air quality and infectious diseases - as the first dimension. The report gave a 70 per cent weightage to these environmental factors, for they have the biggest impact on the health and welfare of residents and visitors. Singapore was ranked second in this dimension.

Environmental factors not directly under government control - such as rising sea levels, water scarcity, severe storms and fires - were designated as the second dimension. Singapore ranked 16th in this dimension.

And environmental factors that are highly unpredictable - such as earthquakes, typhoons and volcanic eruptions - were designated the third. Singapore was ranked 9th in this dimension.

That Singapore was ranked so well overall speaks well of its Government. The Singapore Green Plan 2012 will ensure that Singapore remains a clean and green city in the years to come despite rapid development.

In terms of management of water supplies, not only will Singapore become potentially self-sufficient by 2011, it is also fast becoming a hub for water recycling and desalination technology. It is already exporting such technologies to China and the Middle East.

By 2011, Newater production facilities will contribute more than 30 per cent of our domestic water supplies, reservoirs about 60 per cent, with the remainder coming from desalination and supplies from Malaysia.

The completion of the Marina Reservoir next year will increase Singapore's domestic water catchment areas to two-thirds of its total land area. This would make Singapore self-sufficient in water. Historically, Singapore had been dependent on Malaysia for around 40 per cent of its total water supplies.

In spite of these successes, however, Singapore faces some challenges. It does not have a rural hinterland and, hence has to conserve its existing nature areas as best it can.

The link between humans and nature should never be severed. People living in an urban setting tend to forget the importance of nature conservation and preservation.

The Singapore Government has adopted the position that ungazetted nature reserves and areas will be kept 'for as long as possible'. This is commendable but also slightly worrisome as such areas may have to

be forgone for development in the future.

The current 4 per cent of land that has been gazetted for nature conservation and the protection of bio-diversity already falls below the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's recommendation of 10 per cent.

By ensuring that more nature areas are legally protected, Singapore will be able to protect its bio-diversity pool. In this respect, the gazettement of the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve in 2002 was a very important step for land-scarce Singapore.

The protection of nature reserves performs two equally important functions.

A country which has beautiful natural landscapes and open spaces, together with a lively and creative urban landscape, has character. A pleasant green environment would engender a sense of rootedness as well as pride in belonging to a beautiful city. Nature reserves can also boost tourism. Tourists will be 'surprised' that a city can have beautiful 'untouched' nature reserves.

Second, nature reserves serve a hydrological function by ensuring that our regular rain and weather patterns are not affected by the excessive removal of forests. Our reservoirs can continue to function as storage areas for the water we need.

Singapore as a small city state can be lauded for managing successfully its urban environment and for reducing its environmental vulnerabilities.

Our connection to nature and the intrinsic and non-intrinsic values attached to nature areas must never be unwittingly traded off for the sake of urbanisation.

The writer is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

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