

Mother Earth is sick

Tommy Koh

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APRIL 22 is celebrated by the peoples of the world as Earth Day. I hope that Singaporeans will take a few moments from their busy lives to think about the health of Mother Earth. Mother Earth is sick.

The Earth is the only planet with the conditions to sustain human life. The future of humanity depends upon the preservation of a healthy biosphere, with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters and clean air. As the Earth Charter notes, the protection of the Earth's vitality, diversity and beauty is our shared obligation.

We have failed to live up to our obligation. On the contrary, for the past 200 years, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the world, led by the West, has evolved patterns of production and consumption which have caused environmental devastation, the depletion of resources and massive extinction of species.

One of the biggest threats to the health of Mother Earth is caused by the increasing demand for and the use of the fossil fuels, coal, oil and gas, to generate electricity and to power vehicles, plants and equipment.

The burning of the fossil fuels produces carbon dioxide (CO₂), about half of which is absorbed by the atmosphere. This causes global warming which, in turn, leads to a change in the Earth's climate.

Scientific evidence warning us about the impact of the greenhouse gases on global warming first surfaced in the 1970s. Initially, the reaction was sceptical, with many arguing that the case had not been proven. As more evidence was adduced, the reaction was that the threat was remote and there was plenty of time to take remedial action. Recently, due to undeniable empirical evidence, the 2006 report of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change and the Stern Report, a tipping point was reached.

There is now near universal consensus that we are faced with an emergency and the probable threat of an ecological disaster if we do not drastically reduce our emission of CO₂ and, wherever feasible, reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

Singapore, with a population of only 4.5 million people, is only a small part of humanity. However, all countries, big and small, developed and developing, rich and poor, can and should make an appropriate contribution to the common cause.

What can Singapore do? I commend the following 10 suggestions for your consideration.

First, Singapore should set a time-frame, for example, three years, to phase out incandescent light bulbs and to replace them with energy-saving bulbs. An incandescent light bulb uses most of the electricity to produce heat instead of light. I note that the Australian government has recently announced that it intended to ban incandescent light bulbs.

Second, technology has invented an even more energy-saving method to illuminate traffic lights and public places. The technology is called light-emitting diodes (LEDs). I hope our authorities will examine the feasibility of using LEDs.

Third, I hope that the Singapore Government will set an example by adopting a policy of purchasing hybrid, or other energy-efficient and low-polluting, vehicles when it is making new purchases of vehicles. I hope the Government's good example will influence the behaviour of Singaporeans and dampen the enthusiasm for Sports Utility Vehicles (SUVs) and other gas-guzzlers. Driving such environmentally unfriendly vehicles seems to be a status symbol in Singapore. We should change the paradigm and make it fashionable to drive energy-efficient vehicles and unfashionable to drive gas-guzzlers.

Fourth, I suggest that the Singapore Government should consider persuading the Singapore Real Estate Developers Association, the Singapore Institute of Architects, the Singapore Institute of Planners, the Singapore Institute of Engineers and the Association of Consulting Engineers (Singapore) to agree to benchmark best international practice in the design and construction of our new buildings for the efficient use of energy, water and other resources. Unlike other leading cities in the world, Singapore does not have enough 'green' buildings. I applaud the 2005 initiative of our Building and Construction Authority, supported by the National Environmental Agency, to award the Green Mark to buildings based upon five criteria, including energy and water efficiency.

Fifth, the Singapore Government should also persuade the Singapore Hotel Association to adopt Japanese best practices in the efficient use of energy. Japan is the world's most efficient energy user, calculated on the basis of the amount of energy used to produce US\$1 GDP. On a recent visit to Tokyo, I was impressed by the energy efficiency of the hotel I stayed in. The good features I observed include the use of energy-efficient light bulbs, the low lighting along the corridors which could become brighter when triggered by a motion detector, the use of one's room key to turn on the power supply in the guest's bedroom and the thermostat set at 26 deg C as the normal setting.

Sixth, the Singapore Government should consider adopting the United States Environmental Protection Agency's energy efficiency rating system. The USEPA awards 'energy stars' to appliances, commercial buildings and hotels. Such a rating system would enable environmentally friendly consumers to make informed choices.

Seventh, the Singapore Government should encourage all air-conditioned buildings, offices, restaurants, cinemas and other public spaces to set their thermostats at a temperature which some National University of Singapore scholars have found to be our comfort level, that is, 23 deg C. At the moment, many of our hotels and restaurants set their thermostats at 15 deg C or 20 deg C. I will never forget an occasion when a visiting trade minister from Mongolia, attending a banquet in one of our leading hotels, told our ministers that Singapore was colder than Mongolia.

Eighth, the Singapore Government should encourage all government offices to have an assigned person who would ensure that the office lights are switched off during the lunch break and, at the end of the day, ensure that all unnecessary lights, computers, monitors, printers, fax machines are turned off.

Ninth, the Singapore Government should work closely with the private sector to promote the growth in Singapore of research, development and businesses in energy efficiency; in clean and renewable energy sources such as biomass,

biofuel, solar, thermal and photovoltaic cells; in carbon trading; and in green and clean energy funds. The Economic Development Board should target some of the major players in these areas to locate in Singapore. Singapore can play a leadership role in this area. It can also serve as an honest broker between Asia and the West in environmental diplomacy.

Tenth, the battle against global warming and climate change cannot be won by the actions of the Government and business alone. It can only be won if each of us is persuaded by the urgency of the problem and is prepared to make adjustments to our lifestyle, our values and our attitude towards nature and Mother Earth. We can reduce the consumption of energy and emission of CO₂. We can aspire to lead simple lives rather than lives of conspicuous consumption.

When we make purchases, we can look for environmentally certified vehicles, plant, equipment, wood, etc. Most of all, we need to love Mother Earth and do our little part to help restore the balance between the human enterprise and the natural world. The feature of human civilisation depends upon restoring that balance.

Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh served as Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for, and the Main Committee at, the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Last year, he was conferred the President's Award for the Environment.