**Stop using polystyrene**

THE Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) wishes to call the attention of the Selangor and Penang state governments and especially the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, to the widespread use of polystyrene food and drink containers during the recent Thaipusam festival in their respective states.

CAP conducted a study comprising random data collection at both locations where large crowds gathered during the festival to gather information on the number of polystyrene food and drink containers used.

Shockingly, the study revealed that 630,000 and 347,000 polystyrene food and drink containers were used in Selangor and Penang respectively. This data was acquired over the two days of the festival and from the numerous stalls providing free food and drink.

At times, these stalls provided up to 40,000 polystyrene food and drink packages. The data gathered does not include polystyrene package usage in other states such as Kedah, Johor or Perak during Thaipusam.

CAP takes a serious view of the fact that almost 1,000,000 polystyrene containers were used during the two days. Although there have been claims that polystyrene can be classified as non-hazardous to the environment, there is no scientific evidence to support these claims as yet.

Polystyrene is not biodegradable. It not only floats on water but is also borne by the wind, thereby polluting shores and waterways.

According to the California Coastal Commission, it is now a principal component of marine debris. The substance may also be harmful to wild animals if ingested by them.The international environment group, Californians Against Waste classifies polystyrene as a future potential threat to sustainable development.

According to a study by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER), polystyrene which is manufactured using HCFC-22 (Chlorodifluoromethane, a potential ozone depleting agent and potent greenhouse gas) is potentially three to five times more likely to pose a threat to the environment than other waste material.

CAP urges concerned parties in all states to play an important role in ending the use of polystyrene; not just during Thaipusam celebrations but also at official functions and celebrations.

It is regrettable that polystyrene was widely used while there are more recyclable, sustainable and freely obtainable alternatives such as banana leaves and environmentally friendly containers pioneered by Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment needs to be more aggressive in addressing the reduction of polystyrene use at all official functions as well as at national level festivities and celebrations.

As long as there are no aggressive steps taken by the authorities to halt the use of polystyrene, it will be difficult to expect society to embark on a paradigm shift to rejuvenate and preserve the environment.

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