

Southeast Asia's haze – call for better public information

January 8 2016, by Lindsay Brooke



Credit: Wendy Kendall

For months on end swathes of South East Asia have been blanketed in a thick haze created by seasonal peat forest fires in Indonesia. This recurrent phenomenon has had serious environmental, economic and public health implications. Schools have been forced to close, flights cancelled and sporting events disrupted. Only the onset of the northeast monsoon in November brought respite from the toxic smoke.

Now academics at The University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus (UNMC) are calling for the provision of accurate and timely information about air quality after research, published in the academic journal *PLOS One*, showed this would translate into beneficial practices, at least among [amateur athletes](#) involved in outdoor sports.

Dr Laura De Pretto, from Mindset, UNMC's Interdisciplinary Centre for Environmental Studies, said: "Air pollution is a major threat to [human](#)

[health](#) and life satisfaction. Everyday lifestyle of Malaysians is negatively affected by haze and our study reflects generally negative expectations that the problem will be solved or mitigated in the future."

To assess the knowledge, attitudes and practices in relation to atmospheric haze pollution in peninsular Malaysia Dr De Pretto, based in the Department of Applied Psychology, and an interdisciplinary team of academics and students from UNMC carried out a cross-sectional survey in Kuala Lumpur and the popular tourist resort of Port Dickson 95km away.

Of the 305 respondents, 125 were amateur athletes participating in a duathlon event. The remainder were surveyed in a popular inner-city shopping mall. They were asked to rank the importance of four types of impacts of the haze – economy, environment, health and training.

The results showed that gender and education had no effect on the level of concern. However, age did and with older respondents showing greater awareness of the problem. And respondents who regularly practice outdoor sport showed higher levels of awareness than those who did not. And the higher the level of awareness the greater the concern.

These concerns were overwhelmingly due to its effects on human health and the health of the natural environment, with economic effects rated last on a scale of negative impacts. Some of our respondents had even considered leaving the country because of the effects of the haze and many expected air-quality in the future to be 'terrible'.

Peat fires start to burn in Indonesia every year as farmers clear areas of rainforest for agriculture. They smolder under the surface for long periods and are extremely difficult to extinguish. More fires were detected in 2015 than in any year since satellite records began and El Nino may yet induce a second burning season next February and March.

Dr Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz, also from Mindset, said: "The seasonal peat fires and associated haze in Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia are one of the worst environmental disasters of our time. Although we found relatively low awareness about the causes and effects of the haze, our results show that higher awareness leads to more concern – the more people know the more they care – and both can lead to behavioral changes among the population. This reinforces the need to provide sound and clear information to the public about the [haze](#) and other environmental issues."

More information: 'The link between knowledge, attitudes and practices in relation to atmospheric haze and pollution in peninsular Malaysia' can be found here: [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0143655](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0143655).

Provided by University of Nottingham

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