



## Here's Hoping the Haze Stays Away

By Bill Poorman

If you're relatively new to Singapore, it's likely that you have never lived through one of the haze events that have periodically enveloped the island in prior years. Count yourself fortunate. During especially bad haze events, all of Singapore can smell and feel like standing downwind of a roaring campfire. If it's really bad, it can even penetrate into closed houses running air con. No fun at all, that haze.

Haze refers to 'transboundary haze', meaning it crosses over international borders. The haze starts with the world's demand for palm oil. Oil palms are grown on plantations in Singapore's neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia. Farmers and corporations will often use fire to clear land to make room for more crops. If those fires continue for too long or are too widespread, they create huge plumes of smoke that drift across Southeast Asia, clouding up and poisoning the air. The worst smoke comes from fires in Indonesia on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo.

Various factors contribute to the intensity of haze. For one, the plantations in Indonesia are located on peatland. Peatland is made up of partially decayed plants and, once it is set alight, it tends to burn for a long time at a low intensity, creating huge amounts of smoke. Second, unscrupulous growers can flout laws and restrictions on clearing new land, but in recent years, regional governments, including Indonesia, have made special efforts to reign in these bad actors. Finally, global weather patterns can have an influence – specifically, El Niño.

El Niño is a cyclical warming of a large portion of the Pacific Ocean along the Equator. It was named by South American fishermen, who first noticed how the water would occasionally warm. They named it El Niño – baby boy – since it tended to begin around Christmas. The corresponding eventual cooling of those waters has come to be called La Niña, or little girl.

When an El Niño event occurs, it can change weather patterns around the world. For example, in the US, weather agencies are forecasting that southern and mid-Atlantic states could see more precipitation and possibly more snow this winter – although it depends on the ultimate strength of this El Niño. It's anticipated that it should be on the weak side. In Southeast Asia, an El Niño can sometimes lead to less rain, which is normally counted on to help tamp down palm oil plantation fires before they grow too large.

Here in Singapore, the Meteorological Service Singapore is currently forecasting a relatively mild El Niño, so any possible disruptions to world weather might be slight. Also, Singapore's National Environment Agency emphasizes that the connection between El Niño events and haze problems tends to be fairly weak. It emphasizes the many factors that go into whether the Little Red Dot becomes the Very Hazy Spot – factors as complex as the steps neighboring governments and corporations have taken to help solve the problem to things as simple as the direction the wind happens to blow.

The last three years have been fortunate for Singapore, with little to no haze. The last major event was in 2015 and lasted for three months. There was an especially bad event in 2013, as well. Here's hoping that we've seen the last of those days.

*Bill Poorman is a writer who's lived in Singapore for four years, which means he dodged one haze, but got to enjoy the big one. No matter what, he recommends stocking up on government-approved face masks, just in case.*

Photo by Bill Poorman

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