Unit Komunikasi Korporat

KERATAN AKHBAR

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The last green mile

Our environmental champions, activists and conservationists reflect on the year that was and the way forward, writes **Elena Koshy**

AS I see it, 2019 has been a year of irretrievable losses. From the forest fires of the Amazon and Indonesia (and many other parts of the world) to losing our last Sumatran rhino and reading of the plight of our indigenous communities who have long been guardians of our natural heritage, it seems like conservation has been on the backburner of many governments' policies and priorities.

Nature should be conserved because of its intrinsic worth, and not only because of its immediate usefulness to humankind. But in the 21st century, as populations expand and people encroach ever further into the last remaining wild places, attention towards protecting our flora and fauna species as well as the wellbeing of our indigenous communities have become inseparable from the wellbeing of the planet.

Yet the perennially low level of concern, which flickers upwards momentarily when disaster strikes, then slumps back into the customary stupor, is an almost inevitable result of a society that has become restructured around politics, ambition and the pursuit of money. Do we really care for nature? Can we make a difference?

How we break the circle and wake people up is the question that all those who love the living planet should address. There will be no easy answers. We live in an extraordinary time. A time where logging, forest burning, poaching, introduced pathogens, climate change, overfishing and ocean acidification form the handiwork of one single destructive species — man. The last mass extinction which decimated our dinosaurs some 66 million years ago was caused by an asteroid impact. This time, the asteroid is us.

Perhaps by recognising this, we can begin to imagine creating a different one — one that preserves, as much as is still possible, the wonderful diversity of life.

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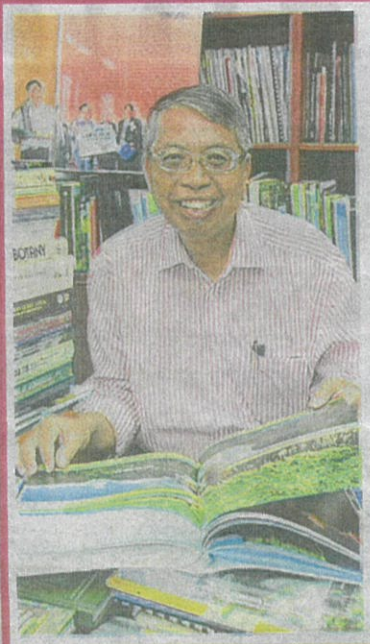


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PROFESSOR EMERITUS DATUK DR ABDUL LATIFF MOHAMAD

Emeritus Professor at University Kebangsaan Malaysia, Fellow, Academy of Science Malaysia and 2015 Merdeka Award winner for outstanding contribution to the research and understanding of plant taxonomy and conservation biology in Malaysia

REFLECTIONS

Globally, the environment has been put in great peril as the human population keeps on multiplying, the economy continuing in an uncertain pattern while the earth's natural resources are being steadily depleted. The situation in Malaysia is no exception to that of the global scenario although at a much lower scale, magnitude and impact. In other words, the planet is becoming much too small for the ever-growing population. Humanity will be facing even more serious problems unless they make a conscious and unconventional decision to change their unsustainable way of living.

Over the years, governments and scientists including the public at large have raised greater awareness on the impending environmental issues leading to many steps and actions being put in place — some with success and some failed.

In Malaysia biodiversity isn't a new scientific discipline but a neglected one, especially in the last three decades. Though it became very popular locally after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) (also known as the Rio Summit) in 1992, and the subsequent conference ten years later in Johanesburg (Rio + 10), the interests and concerns have steadily diminished because of many conflicting messages policy and decision makers sent to the masses including school teachers and researchers in local universities and research institutes.

However, the keystones to biodiversity is taxonomy or systematics — the arts and science of identifying, classifying and naming organisms, the tenets of our biodiversity. In this context the taxonomists are a dying breed because taxonomy is perceived as an uninteresting subject, possibly not scientific.

Malaysia is a megadiverse country with uncountable number of species constituting the various marine and terrestrial ecosystems that all of us treasure as our natural capital, resources and heritage. While in many developed countries whose biodiversity — which forms the natural heritage — has been put on the pedestal and made important, it unfortunately takes the back seat here in this nation. I sincerely hope it won't be the case in the coming years.

HOPES

As we approach the year 2020, my humble hopes for the biodiversity and the environment lies in our efforts to address the sorry state of our reference collections. While we're deprived of a Natural History Museum to house our natural assets, we should start thinking of housing our plant collections in a National Herbarium and our animal and microbial collections in a National Zoological Museum. Another hope that I harbour in my mind is for the Federal government to start mainstreaming our National Biodiversity Policy to all the stake-holders, namely the state and local governments for they are the rightful custodians of our biodiversity. Without the involvement of the state governments and the private sectors, I believe our natural assets within the changing ecosystems and habitats will be in great jeopardy.

DR COLIN NICHOLAS

Coordinator, Centre for Orang Asli Concerns (COAC)

REFLECTIONS

It's difficult to assess how far the Orang Asli have advanced or progressed in 2019. If anything, it has been a year of contradictory signals from the political leadership. The Federal Government taking the (opposition-controlled) Kelantan State Government to court, in acknowledgement of the rights of the Temiar in Pos Simpor to their customary lands, was a pleasant surprise. Yet, in the state of Perak, the ruling coalition justifies similar logging and plantation activities on Orang Asli customary territories on the grounds that "there is no such thing as ancestral lands in Perak".

The Selangor State Government recently established a permanent committee to look in to the development and welfare of the Orang Asli in the state. A total of RM500,000 was allocated for, among other things, infrastructure development, health improvement, education, and house renovation in 2020. For the 20,000 Orang Asli in the state, this works out to RM25 for each Orang Asli! Another case of well-placed intentions not backed up with realistic commitments.

This year also saw the Department of Orang Asli Advancement, JAKOA, taking proactive steps to consult Orang Asli and other concerned parties, including NGOs and academics, on the design of an National Orang Asli Action Plan. But without the budget and personnel to see the plan through, this plan too is likely to go the way of such plans in the past.



HOPES

My hope for 2020, is that our top national leaders, and the heads of the respective states, pronounce unequivocally that the traditional territories of the Orang Asli are recognised as their right and entitlement, and that all legal and administrative measures to secure those lands (and their environments) must be effected for the Orang Asli .

This would be an important first step towards preventing tragedies such as the deaths of 16 Bateq-Orang Asli in Kuala Koh, Kelantan. While the authorities may try to assign the blame for the deaths on the nomadic and unhygienic lifestyle of the Bateqs, to me the tragedy was a direct consequence of the destruction and degradation of the Orang Asli customary lands. The logging of their resource base, the allowing of external plantations right up to their doorstep, the granting of licenses to operate mines above their water sources — all these a consequence of the state's non-recognition of their rights to their customary lands — resulted in the conditions that brought about the pathological causes of the deaths.

It has become evident that only with recognition, will we begin to reduce Orang Asli marginalisation.

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DR EVELYN LIM AI LIN

Environmental education lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia

REFLECTIONS

In Malaysia, we're never short of environmental education programmes. It's very encouraging to know that despite the slowdown of the economy, the government, corporate sectors, non-governmental organisations and local communities are committed towards implementing various environmental education programmes.

It isn't surprising that most Malaysians possess some basic knowledge about air and water pollution, deforestation, solid waste, flood, haze, global warming and climate change. But many do not fully understand the implication of our current environmental concerns and are less likely to commit or act on these issues. Studies have shown that Malaysians are selective towards committing to an environment cause, i.e. those issues that "are in my backyard" and/ or if they provide some form of personal gains such as saving money.

Being aware about an environmental issue doesn't always lead to behavioural change. This is attributed to how we talk about such issues. We're guilty of using technical terms and jargons to explain complex natural phenomenon and issues that in turn, become incomprehensible, irrelevant and unimportant to the layman. We alienate man from his environment instead of linking man with nature — the connections and relationship we establish with our natural environment in our everyday lives. We fail to make people understand that we're part of the environment system and that nature belongs to everyone. Failing to understand the basic relationship, coupled with the complexity of green issues have resulted in many shying away from being part of the solution.



Dr Evelyn Lim Ai Lin (second from left).

HOPES

Environmental education is an organised effort to teach about the processes and functions of the natural environment, how human beings can manage their behaviour and ecosystems to live sustainably. I hope initiatives can be taken to coordinate, strategise and synergise the various environmental education initiatives in the country so that the development and implementation of environmental education is clear and well directed.

As environmental educators and conservationists, we have an important voice and are story tellers of our natural environment. Let's not drown important messages with technical terms and jargons that end up making environmental issues beyond people's comprehension. We need to work closer to make environmental issues relevant and important to all. Conservation does not happen with just technology. Conservation begins with people.

DR WONG SIEW TE

Founder and chief executive officer, Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC)

REFLECTIONS

We must learn from the failures to safeguard our wildlife, and to make sure that bad historic events will not repeat. In 2019, Malaysian and the entire world mourned the loss of our last male and female Sumatra rhino, Tam and Iman respectively. We have to take this country extinction of Sumatra rhino seriously, and do everything possible to stop the extinction of other endangered species like Malayan tigers, tapirs, gaurs, bantings, Asian elephants, sun bears and many others.

Over the past few decades, we have failed to safeguard many of our lowland rainforests, the most crucial elements for the survival of all forest dependent species. This threat was and is immediately followed by many forms of encroachments including poaching. With the gap between the rich and the poor becoming bigger and bigger, the small portion of rich people are willing to pay very high prices on wildlife products including exotic pets, to a point where poor poachers and wildlife traders like Amsyar Imani Bin Ahmad Zaifuddin, a.k.a. Kejora Amsyar, will risk everything to exploit our precious wildlife.



Dr Wong Siew Te monitoring the release Malayan sun bears.

We must declare war on poachers, wildlife traders, traffickers, and buyers. Imagine that this relatively small group of people have caused a huge negative impact to the survival of our precious wildlife. Thankfully in 2019 we have started to see many changes in our country to protect our remaining wildlife. Department of Wildlife and National Park Peninsular Malaysia or Perhilitan, Sabah Wildlife Department, and Sarawak Forestry Department have launched a series of operations to patrol and look out for illegal activities in our forests. More wildlife offenders are being prosecuted in courts and sentenced accordingly.

HOPES

I wish for a time machine so we could travel back ten or twenty years ago to put enough wildlife patrolling and anti-poaching teams in our forests. While this isn't possible, my second wish is for more patrolling and anti-poaching teams now and harsher punishments for the offenders who are targeting the remaining wildlife in our country, in the coming new year!

KANITHA KRISHNASAMY

Director, TRAFFIC in Southeast Asia

REFLECTIONS



One can scroll through a Facebook or WhatsApp group, maybe watch a video and a few minutes later put in a purchase order for a baby orang utan. That is one of the simplest and easiest forms of illegal wildlife trade in today's materialistic and digital media Malaysia. We live in a world where many Malaysians want to, and think its okay to keep a diapered baby bear or gibbon in their apartment — all easily purchased at the tap of the fingers — never once sparing a thought about how that baby animal might have been stolen from its family in the wild. Never once thinking about the consequences of committing a crime.

Our last Sumatran rhino, Iman died last month in a captive facility. The symbol and pride of the nation, the Malayan Tiger, is at an all-time low of less than 200 individuals, compared to the 1000 individuals we thought we could secure a decade ago. A processing facility in Sabah was found with close to 30 tonnes of pangolin meat 10 months ago. Orang utans and elephants have been found either poisoned or with bullet wounds — one elephant alone had more than 70 gunshot wounds from a semiautomatic weapon fired at close range, its tusks removed. Both Malaysian and foreign hunters continue to trap, snare and shoot wildlife in our forests, in numbers that are mindboggling. Lesser profiled wildlife such as birds, deer, porcupines, turtles and tortoises, snakes, lizards, seahorses, sea cucumbers and a slew of others all continue to be poached and traded illegally in the hundreds and thousands, to feed a local demand but often also linked to cross-border smuggling. On transnational organised crime in the past decade, Malaysia has been implicated in the smuggling of about 40 tonnes of ivory and pangolin scales and whole animals, largely from the African continent.

A vast majority of perpetrators involved are still free. It all seems dire and depressing, and it is. But 2019 also turned out to be a year of hope.

Wildlife crime is now being taken seriously. Prosecutors and the judiciary are upping their game, with convicted poachers sentenced to unprecedented fines of up to RM1.5 million for wildlife offences. Our Prime Minister's wife lent her voice to the Malayan Tiger campaign; RM1.4 million has been raised so far for anti-poaching and anti-trafficking efforts in Peninsular Malaysia. Governments and concerned citizens put out a bounty of RM30,000 to find an elephant poacher; the culprits were later found. The Royal Malaysian Police came onboard to fight wildlife crime, resulting in arrests and asset forfeiture. Anti-money laundering investigations were initiated on Malaysian ivory traders; firearms charges are being pursued.

These crimes are not "just a wildlife issue". Firearms, machetes and other weapons, forests littered with snares and illegal poachers are all very real risks to national security. Hunters have caused fatal accidents to their hunting buddies, sometimes involving those in the uniform. Those moving containerised wildlife to and through Malaysia undermine our transportation and logistics sector while making a killing from their untaxed, illicit operations.

The death of Iman is a stark reminder that extinction is very real in our lifetime, not some distant and unforeseeable future. We need to demonstrate to the future generation that we did all we could to prevent other from the same fate. Our knowledge and understanding of these issues are more superior now compared to two decades ago, when the resources at hand were also not as advanced. The technologies, investigative capacities on forensics, digital crime and profiling is of 21st century calibre.

HOPES

As we approach 2020 and embark on a new decade, it's time reflect and reboot. A positive momentum has been achieved and must be sustained. Our wildlife depend on it.

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