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Former lawyer finds calling in nature conservation

► NGO founder and ecotourism expert Andrew Sebastian now living his passion conducting guided tours

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PETALING JAYA: Having spent 20 years of his life in the government quarters at the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) in Selangor, love for nature is in environmentalist Andrew Sebastian's blood.

"My father was attached to FRIM and later, its Forest Training Unit. His involvement with nature led to my strong bond with the environment," he told *theSun*.

Andrew's name is familiar among bird watchers and he is a licenced nature guide and ecotourism expert. But surprisingly, he began his working life as a lawyer. However, the strong call of the wild beckoned him.

"After chambering at a law firm and obtaining my Certificate in Legal Practice, I decided to take a six-month break from legal work. Later, I was introduced to the Malaysian Nature Society and became its Education Officer. I've never looked back since."

At 22, his first task as an activist was to campaign against a proposal to build a cable car system in Taiping, Perak. After meeting residents there, he managed to gain more than 2,000 signatures opposing the project.

"I felt happy that I was able to make an impact. We had a lot of local support."

Today, Andrew runs nature camps for children and conducts guided tours.

He said children who attend the camps are taught to catch frogs and identify the species.

"This meant I had to do a lot of reading to equip myself with the right knowledge about trees, frogs and birds."

Realising that there is a lack of knowledge about nature and conservation among the public, Andrew spearheaded the setting up of Ecotourism and Conservation Society Malaysia, a non-governmental organisation, in 2016.

One memory that is etched in his mind is witnessing a wild bird being poached during a bird-watching trip with a tour group.

"A man had set a bird trap. He had put a stick

with glue in a birdcage.

"A bird in the cage was used to attract wild ones, which got stuck on the stick. I was upset. I firmly told the poacher that it was against the law and reported the matter to a wildlife hotline. The (trapped) birds were released," Andrew said.

Another matter of concern for him is the poaching of mouse deers. He said these days, it is nearly impossible to spot them.

"About 10 years ago, we could see at least five mouse deers on Tioman Island during visits. There have been heavy poaching activities since then."

Mouse deers are classified as a protected species under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010. Offences involving the species carry a mandatory jail term and a fine of up to RM500,000.

Andrew called for more funding to be allocated to enforcement officers in the Wildlife Department.

He also feels encouraged that the public is slowly awakening to the need to protect nature and the ecosystem.

"Although what we have today is not a perfect system, slowly, we're getting there. Some are adopting a minimalist lifestyle and not using plastic bags. It is a promising start," Andrew said.