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The people's planet

Malaysians – ranging in age from a 10-year-old to an octogenarian – come together to share how they are caring for the environment.

By SIM LEOI LEOI
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THEY turn up to listen on a warm Sunday morning – a handful at first but by the end of the first hour, as the sun heated up the day, the venue in Taman Tugu, Kuala Lumpur, is crowded with spectators.

They have come to listen to stories and ideas on conservation in Malaysia from the country's "environmental stewards" who range in age from a 10-year-old boy to an octogenarian.

And the topics are equally diverse, stretching from documentary filmmaking and storytelling to presentations on working with everything from forest and rivers to urban parks and soil health.

Organised by Taman Tugu, "The People Library" event on June 12 focused on conservation in con-

junction with World Environment Day the week before.

The free-of-charge occasion was the first to be held since the country began transitioning out of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among those sharing their experiences in local environmental protection and conservation are former Malaysian Nature Society president Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor, former director-general of the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia Datuk Seri Dr Abd Rahman Abd Rahim, Perak State Parks director Shah Redza Hussein, Sampah Menyampah founder Carolyn Lau, 14-year-old river ranger Lukas Santana and television personality and fitness trainer Rina Omar.

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Photo: 123rf.com

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The team from Forest House giving a talk on 'Seed Collection of Forest Species and Nursery Establishment' during The People Library event. — Photos: AZHAR MAHFOF/The Star

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Conservation veteran

Looking back on his years of experience in conservation, Salleh Mohd Nor, the oldest speaker at 82, says that Malaysians' appreciation of nature has increased since he first embarked on his environmental conservation journey.

"You can see from the many people who turn up in Taman Tugu park every weekend.

"But my concern is whether the political will to protect the environment has also risen in tandem. Especially at the state level because land and forests come under state governments.

"If the states won't buy in, there's no point in the federal government talking until the cows come home," he says in an interview after his talk.

Pointing to the massive flooding that struck the country at the end of 2021, the former director-general of the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia says it was disappointing to see a disaster like that happen.

"The floods are not caused by nature but human beings. We've had heavy rainfall in the past. But we have devastated our watersheds now and they don't have the capacity to retain water anymore," he says.

Salleh, who speaks about the importance of urban parks, thinks the role that nature plays in our lives is more important than ever in the aftermath of the pandemic, especially as people struggle to cope with all the consequent pressures.

"We are living in difficult times. It's not just the economy and cost of living [that people are struggling with] but pressure from life, their peers and work.

"And one of the best ways to release that pressure is to go for a walk. The symbiotic relationship between man and the environment is not given enough attention," he says, calling for the establishment of more parks in urban areas, particularly cities like Ipoh and Johor Baru.

Smells like teen spirit

Lukas John Santana could have spent his Sunday morning in bed or doing what any typical teenager like him is into (like social media) but instead, he was at Taman Tugu to share his thoughts on river conservation.

At only 14, the home-schooled boy is already an old hand in environmental protection issues after first getting involved in activities of NGO Sampah Menyampah eight years ago.

Since then, and with encourage-

Tales of green experiences



(Above and inset) Abd Rahman explaining how forests are not just about timber and how they add value to the environment.

ment from his parents, there has been no looking back for Lukas, who now considers himself a citizen scientist.

Speaking on "Forests-Led Rivers are Our Waters of Life - Becoming a River Ranger", the teenager says rivers in Malaysia should be treated as living entities. "In other countries like Bangladesh, India and New Zealand, rivers are treated as living entities - that is, like a human in the courts of law," he explains.

Lukas gives the example of a court case in Bangladesh in which a river was recognised as a "living entity" in a legal action taken against a construction company. In the landmark decision issued in February 2019, the Bangladesh High Court recognised the Turag river as a living entity that deserved to be treated as "a legal person, a juristic person and has the right to protect its rights".

"We should have clean rivers in the future," declares Lukas firmly.

Welcome to the jungle

At 65 and a stroke survivor at that, Abd Rahman Abd Rahim

should be taking it easy after having helmed the Forestry Department of Peninsular Malaysia as director-general for years.

But Abd Rahman is out at Taman Tugu driven to share an important message: there's more to forests than just timber.

Besides merely providing timber revenue, forests are now increasingly recognised for their role as, among others, a source of quality water, fuel and energy and non-wood products, as well protecting coasts from erosion, conserving biodiversity and genetic reserves, regulating climate change, and allowing revenue generation from ecotourism.

"If you don't cut down the trees for timber, you'll get other forms of revenue," he says, adding that ecotourism such as jungle trekking and white river rafting is all the rage now, especially after over two years of movement restrictions.

"When people look at a tree, they see timber. Logging is a process of removing a mature tree. Forest management is logging but what's wrong is the process," he tells a group of college students during his

talk on "Forests Beyond Timbers".

To properly manage the country's forests, the federal government, says Abd Rahman, had set up a National Forestry Council and enacted the National Forestry Act, which gazettes 12 functions for forests. Despite this, geopolitics often plays a role in forest management as land and forests continue to remain under state government control.

"People are the biggest threat to our forests, from the politicians and the community to members of the public," surmises Abd Rahman.

Other talks at the event include architect John Koh's "In Sync With Nature", award-winning filmmaker Lydia Lubon's "From Film to Forest", Save Soil Movement coordinator Patmaselvi Paramarajah's "Life on Earth: Why Soil Matters", Forest House Sdn



Conservation veteran Salleh has seen a rise in environmental awareness among ordinary Malaysians over the decades.



Lukas has been involved in green issues for eight of his 14 years of life and considers himself a citizen scientist.

Bhd's Mohamed Hitam on "Seed Collection of Forest Species and Nursery Establishment", and 10-year-old Arsh Qayyum Lukman's "Invest In Our Planet: Health and Nature - Hand in Hand".

Taman Tugu management says it organised similar The People Library events in 2019 before the pandemic put a stop to them.

Events will now be held once a month, usually on the first Sunday of the month (this event was delayed by a week as there was a World Environment Day celebration held on June 5 that was attended by the Prime Minister).

For more information go to tamantugu.my and Friends of Taman Tugu on Facebook.

