



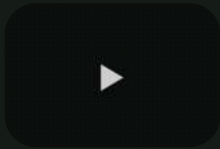
Community

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Protecting the planet we call home

BY VICKY OOI



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What do Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, Stella McCartney and Gisele Bundchen have in common with Ruth Yeoh, Yasmin Rasyid, Serina Hijjas, Aishah Sinclair, Gurmit Singh, Faizal Parish and Christine Das?

Well, they are all warriors for Mother Nature. And while the first four are global celebrities, the rest enjoy a comparatively more low-key name recognition.

Nevertheless they are respected individuals in their fields and acknowledged in the Malaysian environment conservation scene.

Today, we get to know a little more about these greenies in Malaysia.

Yasmin Rasyid

Co-founder and president, EcoKnights



"It is exciting to see the collaborations happening these days, between NGOs, as well as with government bodies. It is a good sign that NGOs are now included in government discussions but the agencies still need to be guided and informed on NGOs' role and how we can contribute. Also a challenge is differentiating ourselves as an NGO from organisers of eco-events. NGOs' project ROI (return on investment) is based on narrative elements, such as whether it leads to behaviour change which is intangible."

INFLUENCERS: My maternal grandmother and her way of life. She grew her own vegetables, used only what was necessary and was frugal. Also, the people I work with, such as EcoKnights programme director Fadly Bakhtiar, who showed me that the team is more important than the individual leading it.

PRIORITY: Three areas of focus are enhancing awareness-raising efforts, capacity-building where we work with communities and monitor projects effectively, and working with government agencies.

OF NOTE: Altruistic care for the environment is still very much internalised at the moment. Our aim is to get people moving from ideation to action. In the same vein, donors' relationship with NGOs needs to evolve and be more involved. Corporate donors should drive behaviour, change policy and put relevant pressure on government to impact beneficiaries.

LASTLY: Be giving. Go simple, start with influencing your neighbour. Walk the talk.

Christine Das

Contemporary artist



"My entire body of work is about nature and Mother Earth. When I first became a full-time artist, I was more focused on trees and rainforest conservation. But in 2013, the incident of a herd of elephants poisoned in Sabah caught my attention and the story of an orphaned baby elephant affected me a lot. I started painting elephants as therapy; coincidentally there was an event in a mall showcasing elephant conservation and I was invited to participate. The full awakening was when I got to know Sabah Conservation Trust and they took me to visit that baby elephant."

INFLUENCERS: I was first inspired by Zainal Abidin and his song, *Hijau*.

PRIORITY: I aim to be a voice for Nature. For the past two years, I have been supporting WWF-Malaysia by donating paintings previously and now I have designed a T-shirt with the elephant motif, for sale as part of the NGO's fundraising.

OF NOTE: From 2012 to 2014, 30% of the proceeds from sale of my elephant artworks went to Borneo Conservation Trust.

I use art paper processed from elephant dung in Nepal and some of my work on postcards use Forest Stewardship Council-approved recyclable paper, soy ink and non-toxic paint.

LASTLY: I try to adopt green practices such as bringing reusable containers for takeaway food. As far as possible, I buy products from sustainable sources. Environment conservation starts with one person and changing oneself.

Gurmit Singh

Chairman and founding executive director, Centre for Environment, Technology and Development Malaysia



"Environment is a misunderstood word. People do not see the issues as consumer-related. Among the big challenges we face are sustaining public interest and helping corporations see the importance of sustainability for projects. And local councils will also need to quantify sustainability, for instance waste generated per capita or the tonnes of rubbish removed from rivers."

INFLUENCERS: In school, I was an active scout and my interest in the environment grew from there. In 1974, I helped to set up the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia and the group of us did a study of Klang River's pollution level by collecting its water and testing the samples in a friend's lab.

PRIORITY: Climate change is a global issue. All over the world, one area that is very hard to tackle is reducing carbon emissions. And a subset of energy use is eco-mobility.

It is one of the "brown issues," relating to human or urban and industrial activities. The fight is different and the results are not easily visible.

Where transportation is concerned, buses have been very neglected in terms of research; there is no data. The important factors for people in choosing public transport over driving are the first and last points of their journey. Their concerns are connectivity, reliability and comfort that relates to the vehicle's interior. One bus that I boarded had cobwebs on the ceiling!

OF NOTE: One of the projects we are most proud of is Cetdem's organic farming. It's our longest running and self-sustaining project but we do need the Government's help to expand it further. We are also working with stakeholders on composting project. Cetdem is also looking at sustainable solutions and the country's resource management, including transport and waste, which is an overlooked resource.

LASTLY: The environment is worth fighting for and we should never give up the fight. If one has the capacity to do it and the means to set things right, do so and fight for public good.

Ruth Yeoh

Executive director, YTL Singapore Pte Ltd; and Director, YTL-SV Carbon Sdn Bhd



“Faith and the understanding of environmental stewardship and the understanding of how to do business in the right and sustainable way, was what I was taught from the beginning. As a child, my father brought me along to many project sites, with my fondest childhood memory being planting seedlings along the shores of one of our developments, Pangkor Laut Resort.”

INFLUENCERS: The Pope in his book, *Laudato Si* (Care for Our Common Home), states that the root of the environmental problem is one of the injustices in the world today. I had the chance to see first-hand how communities in the Amazon rainforest live in harmony with the environment. I also witnessed the reality of deforestation. These experiences continue to inspire me. Sir David Attenborough, who supports a lot of the Kew Foundation’s work in the UK, where I now serve as a trustee.

PRIORITY: Nature’s voice is often drowned out, so YTL steps in to fund and partner environmental organisations in their work. We are implementing our first rural electrification project in Malaysia, partnering with local NGO, Light Up Borneo to build a microhydro system that will provide a source of renewable energy for the Murut community in interior Sabah. The village of more than 200 people has been relying on kerosene lamps, candles and diesel generator sets. The project will provide about 25 to 30kW, enough to power basic appliances in each home. With this energy infrastructure in place, YTL intends to further provide developmental processes, revenue streams and aid for the community’s most pressing needs such as water and wastewater systems.

OF NOTE: One of the projects I am most proud of is the coral rehabilitation project in the waters off Pangkor Island, a collaboration between YTL and Reef Check Malaysia which started in 2010. The coral nurseries we established have successfully resulted in healthy corals thriving again.

LASTLY: In nature, there is a term called “symbiosis.” This can be applied to mankind and the environment. I have been asked the question that if the world was going to end, why bother or help it in the first place? My father’s reply was, “If you knew that someday the ones you love will perish, does it mean you stop loving them?” The core of our sustainability mission is to protect the environment we have been blessed with.

Aishah Sinclair

Co-founder, Free Tree Society; TV host, emcee, radio DJ and advocate of greening the environment



"Two of FTS co-founders, Bettina Khan and Baida Hercus were chatting about the environment and they decided to do something for it. When Bettina got funding for FTS, she invited me to be one of the founding members. Then we were given a plot of vacant land in Bangsar by developer BRDB Developments Sdn Bhd, so we started a nursery and from there we give away trees six or seven times a year, about 100 trees and plants each time.

The amazing thing about trees is that they keep on giving. People who have received trees and plants from us will return to give us seeds."

INFLUENCERS: My mother. I spent a lot of my childhood outdoors. When I was about 10 years old, my mother started the Children's Environment Heritage Foundation to educate children on the importance of taking care of the environment. It was a natural progression for me. I am also inspired by Baidah, who taught me that planting a garden and nurturing it are two different things.

PRIORITY: Ever since I became a mother, protecting the environment became more urgent. We may get our children the best education and food, but are we really saving the best future for them?

People are concerned about the environment, their coming here to get a tree and plant it at their house is a start. It gets them closer to nature and eventually they will nurture the environment around them.

OF NOTE: Right now my garden has a lemon tree. I want to add passionfruit and an aquaponics corner with *kangkung* and spinach.

LASTLY: The more time you spend in nature, the more you get to know it, and the more you get to know it, the easier for you to love it.

Not everyone can embark on a huge campaign because many have day jobs. Start with small thing, collectively we have a huge impact. Solution to environmental problems start at home.

Faizal Parish

Director, Global Environment Centre; Ecologist



“At university in Durham, UK, I got into peatland and wetland issues. When I first came to Malaysia in 1983, peat fire and transboundary haze were a problem and it still is. There is a greater understanding now of what causes the haze. A key achievement is governments recognising the importance of peatland management and an integrated approach to battling fires and haze. We now engage the local community in managing peat restoration and fire prevention. The burning peat will lead to runaway global warming. The global temperature rise is reportedly 4°C, it should be limited to under 2°C. In Malaysia, we can see the dry season getting longer. The next 10 years will be a critical time, if we do not reverse the trend, then everything may be lost.”

INFLUENCERS: The first was the Zoological Society which visited my school and encouraged the children to join as members. When I was about 15, I joined a conservation group that held a peatland campaign. In university, it was Prof David Bellamy, who was the one who suggested to me the desert-crossing expedition in North Australia, which I did in 1981. But the one that probably changed the course of my life was a staff named Dawn Taylor at the MAS office in London who told me about the deal, which for additional £10 I could stop in Kuala Lumpur for a week and it included accommodation at the Merlin hotel. That was in 1983. So I made the trip here as part of my waterbird migration research project.

PRIORITY: The Asean peat management initiative was formulated, working with governments and providing technical support. In Malaysia, various agencies are now integrated and there is cooperation for peat management between all agencies as well as the community. The next level is tackling the challenge of SMIs and smallholdings.

OF NOTE: The extent of fire in Selangor this year was reduced by 90%. Before, 5,000 to 7,000ha of peatland were burnt every year.

LASTLY: We have only one world, so we need to treat it properly. Floods and peat fires are caused by us, our choices and demands. I believe that if we look after the world, the world will look after us.

Serina Hijjas

Director, Hijjas Kasturi Associates; Course director, Malaysia Green Building Confederation; Member, Green Building Index Accreditation Panel



"Sustainable designs are the norm for me as I got straight into it in my first job at Foster Associates in the UK after graduating. In Malaysia, we cannot rely totally on natural ventilation because there is not a lot of air movement, so to cool down a building we need to insulate it better against heat. Passive design, which makes use of elements such as orientation and natural ventilation, is easier with residential properties than high-rise buildings. Aside from designing correctly, we need to look at electrical appliances used, and together the energy savings can amount to 20%. This is important particularly to buildings that work 18 to 24 hours a day, like offices, malls, factories and other owner-occupied properties."

INFLUENCERS: Italian architect Renzo Piano as well as the Cradle to Cradle concept by William McDonough and Michael Braungart.

PRIORITY: The Green Building Index is seven years old now. It is a tool for those looking for a better built environment. We need to alter the mindset of businesses. For developers, there is little incremental cost but the gain is immense.

OF NOTE: Malaysia is one of the fastest growing in green design adoption, involving about 1.5 million sq ft built-up space. Unlike Singapore, it is voluntary in Malaysia and companies here adopt it as CSR.

There are various incentives such as waiver of stamp duty and rebate.

LASTLY: I want to build more places for people to interact, with adoption of as much passive design as possible. Building designs have to have a sense of movement, dynamic like life. And there should be wider canopy of trees and pocket parks to soften the city.

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