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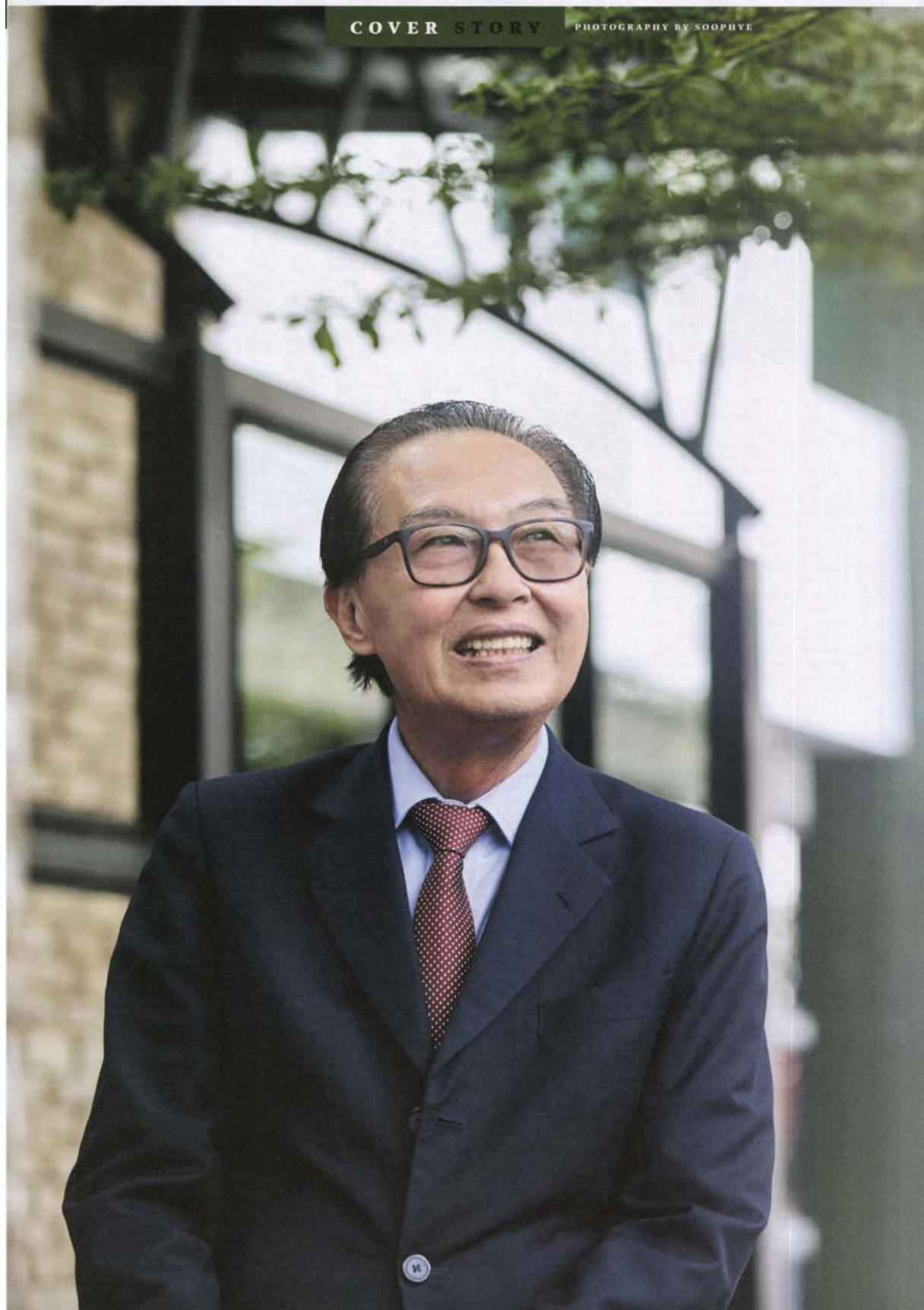
Igniting positive change

Spark Foundation's chairman Tan Sri Saw Choo Boon on conserving the environment and its efforts for a better, cleaner future



COVER STORY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOOPHYE



IT ALL BEGAN WITH A SPARK

SPARK FOUNDATION CHAIRMAN TAN SRI SAW CHOO BOON TALKS TO **SHALINI YEAP** ABOUT THE NEW IDENTITY OF HEINEKEN MALAYSIA'S CSR ARM, ITS DECADES WORTH OF EXPERIENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AND EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES, AND ITS ROLE AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

For Tan Sri Saw Choo Boon, river rehabilitation is an initiative close to his heart. "I grew up near a river — the Perak river, one of the longest in the country. It was a playground for my friends and me. We used to jump in to play or swim around!"

"It was a very good experience for my childhood. I hope rivers can be kept clean so that children today and of the future can enjoy the same fun, recreation and comradeship," explains the chairman of Spark Foundation when asked why the corporate social responsibility arm's work resonates with him.

Established in 2007, Spark Foundation's aim is to grow with the local communities and spark change in environmental conservation and education, all for a better tomorrow. Previously known as the GAB Foundation, the institution's new identity was unveiled earlier this year. The rebranding was partly due to the name change at Guinness Anchor Bhd (GAB) to Heineken Malaysia Bhd in 2014. This was after Dutch brewer Heineken NV fully acquired GAB Pte Ltd, which held a 51% stake in GAB.

With Earth Day falling on April 22, we talk about one of Spark Foundation's two focus areas — river rehabilitation. The WATER (Working Actively Through Education and Rehabilitation) Project is a collaboration between the foundation and the Global Environment Centre — an international non-profit organisation with a regional presence that aims to raise awareness of the importance of river and water conservation through community-based programmes. The WATER Project not only hopes to achieve cleaner rivers but also to change mindsets and empower Malaysians to take greater ownership of rivers, which is its long-term goal.

To date, Spark Foundation has engaged more than 40,000 Malaysians and 85 local communities. Its WATER Project alone has worked with more than 25,000 Malaysians and adopted five rivers — Sungai Way, Sungai Senam, Sungai Buntong, Sungai Kledang and Sungai Penchala.

Saving for non-rainy days

According to the foundation, more than 90% of our water supply comes from rivers, yet only 58% of them are clean. Numbers aside, all it takes to notice their sorry state is to pass by a river that flows through the city. While there have been efforts by multiple government bodies and other agencies to reduce river pollution, it continues to be a major concern that could lead to other problems. In fact, water shortage is an issue faced worldwide. The World Health Organization revealed last year that 3 in 10 people worldwide, or a total of 2.1 billion, lack access to safe, readily available water in their homes.

On homeground, Saw recalls a serious water shortage in 2013. "Demand for water was so high that the charges to rent a water tank rose more than tenfold! At the time,

many possible solutions were discussed but once the situation was over, people quickly moved on," he laments. "If we take things for granted, we may actually face a crisis [that won't go away so easily]. In fact, there are predictions that in the future, water might become such a prized commodity that nations may go to war over it!"

Admittedly, this is a scary notion but Saw gives his assurance that it is not all bleak news.

The motivation to pursue this cause is as practical as it is sentimental to the foundation's chairman. There is no denying that water is an important resource and he cannot begin to stress the importance of conserving it. "If you live by the river, it is your livelihood. I also had classmates who had to row across the river to get to school," says Saw, who learnt the value of our rivers at an early age and is now determined to rehabilitate them.

"Historically, conservation started as a CSR initiative and towards the 1980s, the concept of sustainable development was introduced. There are many definitions but it simply means not doing any harm and protecting the stakeholders as well as the surroundings for generations to come."

The former president of the Malaysian Business Council for Sustainable Development finds that people are more aware and accepting of the concept now than ever before.

Currently, Saw serves as co-chair of the government's Special Task Force to Facilitate Business (Pemudah) and board director of the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (Mida) and the Socio-Economic Research Centre (SERC, a subsidiary of the Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Malaysia). He is also a non-executive independent board member of a number of companies.

In pointing out some reasons why water conservation is more important than most of us may think, increased demand due to a growing world population, reduced water catchment areas resulting from deforestation and pollution of rivers top the list. "Malaysia is one of the few countries in the world where the [volume of] rainfall is more than our consumption. But this does not mean we are blessed and don't have to worry at all," Saw says, commenting on the pressing need for water conservation. Apart from the increasing amount of day-to-day usage, he says low water tariffs — among the lowest in the region — excessive usage and non-revenue-generating water resulting from leakages are contributing factors.

Saw cautions particularly against the grave effects of upstream pollution. "A riverside chicken farm, for example, can increase the ammonia content of water [due to waste discharged into it] to levels unsafe for human consumption. Our wastewater treatment plants cannot treat ammonia contamination. When that happens, the plants are shut down and the contaminated water has to be diluted with fresh water. This [in turn] can result in water shortages."

The economics of water

For those of us who are lucky enough to have access to clean water by simply turning on the tap, all it takes is a supply cut to realise the difficulties that could arise from the lack of water. A case in point is the crisis facing Cape Town in South Africa now. Besides the impediment to daily activities, Saw, who has a Bachelor of Science (chemistry) degree from Universiti Malaya, is also mindful of the effects on the economy. "I am very passionate about supporting Malaysia becoming a developed country. To do this, we have to ensure there is uninterrupted supply of water to industries."

"Many states are facing a shortage of water due to rapid industrialisation. [At the same time] we have industries along the river that are dumping waste into the water."

"It is not a crisis yet but there could be one if we keep this up. It is time we put some serious thought into the matter and ensure that we have a good supply of clean water, not only for day-to-day activities but also to support the growth of industry."

His views on water conservation stem from four decades of working in the oil and gas industry, having joined Shell Malaysia in 1970 and serving in various capacities in manufacturing, supply, trading and planning in Malaysia, Singapore and the Netherlands. Saw was appointed as managing director of Shell MDS (M) Sdn Bhd and then as managing director for oil products (downstream) at Shell Malaysia in 1998.

"The oil and gas industry has attracted a lot of criticism. It is said to be a necessary evil because though it is 'dirty' to the environment, you need it to grow the country. [But] oil companies are very sensitive to this and they know they have to ensure the least harm is done — to the people and earth — in everything they do," he says, speaking from experience.

In 1999, with the globalisation of Shell's oil products business, Saw was appointed vice-president of the commercial business in Asia-Pacific. Six years later, he managed Shell's global marine oil products business before being appointed the chairman of Shell Malaysia and later senior adviser prior to his retirement after 40 years of continuous service.

Spark's education limb

"I didn't come from a rich family but I was lucky because during my time, the government made available quality education no matter where you were. I grew up in a small town but the schools there prepared me for university, competing with students from all over the world," Saw says, explaining the other pillar of the foundation, about which he is equally passionate.

The English Enrichment Training Programme (EETP) is one that the foundation hopes other organisations will replicate in order to reach out to many more students.

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Insight into the foundation

Renuka Indrarajah, a trustee of Spark Foundation, shares some key information on Heineken Malaysia's CSR arm

Collaborative effort

Our call as a foundation is for everyone to work collaboratively. Water and education are not just the government's problems. Everyone has a role to play — the people of Malaysia, corporations and media. One of the goals is to ignite change. So far, it has been very much about us engaging with non-governmental organisations and reaching out to communities. But we would also like to build other strategic partnerships and we have begun to see this with the rebranding. A number of stakeholders have expressed interest in working with us.

Getting the multiple agencies on board was one of the challenges we faced. After that, we set up a steering committee and began to see real progress. The successes that we have achieved would not have been possible without the support of PJ City Council, the Landscape Department, the Department of Environment, Drainage and Irrigation and the Ministry of Environment.

Four main strategies

The foundation has four strategies on how to move forward. They involve promoting the use of water-conservation techniques, such as rainwater harvesting and water thimble technology. We implemented rainwater harvesting at three sites in Sabah late last year and are looking at replicating that and duplicating our efforts in Sabah and Sarawak. Other strategies include improving wastewater management through wetland planting, partnering relevant government agencies and empowering stakeholders on project sites, especially the millennials.

Reaching out to communities

It was tough work when we first started with the Global Environment Centre (GEC). It took about a year of going around knocking on doors to engage communities. We set up a steering community too, in which the local community had a role and a voice. We also worked with the business community to install grease traps in their restaurants and train them on how to clean and maintain the traps. Our Handbook on Urban River Rehabilitation reflects the work that has been done. Its success would not have been possible without the local communities.

The River Cabin

Akin to a multipurpose centre, it is used by GEC to educate people. It was set up in collaboration with the Department of Irrigation and Drainage Selangor, which has three cabins in total at Sungai Way. One is shared with the WATER Project to benefit the community. There is a water-testing tool kit that the local communities use to test the pH levels of water samples as well as biodiversity indicators. If something does not add up, they alert the foundation or GEC about it. Members of the community visit it as well while children frequent it to make use of the books placed there.

Ultimate goal

On an individual level, for Malaysians as a whole to start taking care of their own backyards. From a corporate perspective, it is to do business in a sustainable manner. Heineken Malaysia, as a global company, is very serious about sustainable business and has publicised very ambitious targets on the reduction of carbon emissions and water usage. We hope other companies will follow suit.



Saw (left) and Renuka have spent years pursuing the objectives of the recently rebranded Spark Foundation

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It focuses on improving students' command of English, a language that Saw believes we need to be proficient in to succeed as a global player. To date, the programme has involved 465 educators across 230 schools, benefiting a total of 6,000 students.

"I think it is the right of every citizen to receive affordable, quality education. It shouldn't only be the right of rich people ... education is the only means through which the poor can progress in this world. To deprive them of this tool would mean they are destined for poverty."

Milestones and community involvement

Since its inception, Spark Foundation has spent more than RM17 million on its programmes, including on the environment (RM8 million), education (RM5 million) and partnerships. The funds are predominantly from Heineken Malaysia while donations also come from business partners and the general public, especially those who frequent The Tavern and feel strongly about the cause. Donations in the last 10 years have accounted for an additional RM100,000 to RM200,000.

In 2009, only two years after embarking on the rehabilitation of Sungai Way, the river's water quality improved from Class IV/V (as per National Water Quality Standards), which is classified as extremely polluted, to Class III, which is classified as suitable for living organisms. Following its success in Sungai Way, the WATER Project was extended to Sungai Kinta in Perak in 2013. The latest project is Sungai Penchala, which is 20 times longer than the first river the foundation worked on.

But this, according to Saw, is the easy part. "Keeping the river clean — now, that's the difficult one!" The community plays a pivotal role in ensuring the rivers stay clean and a strong sense of ownership needs to be present in order for this to happen. And Spark has made much progress in this regard.

Our interview takes place at Heineken Malaysia's headquarters in Jalan Kelang Lama, where Prithi Sharma, manager of corporate responsibility and corporate affairs and legal department, is proud to show us the community garden on its grounds. Interestingly, this initiative was the brainchild of community members from the Sungai Way project, who set up the garden. The vegetables are for everyone in the community. The garden was later replicated in several areas in Selangor and Perak and is an example of positive mindset change. Other efforts include candle-making using recyclable items collected from the rivers, which Heineken Malaysia and the foundation support by purchasing the items for their events.

"Cleaning Sungai Way is not going to settle our water supply problem but now the people can see how important water is — and their children will see it too. Then they will clamour to do more and for more action to be taken," Saw points out.

"Our efforts to get the community involved are easier now than when we first started but it is still not an easy task. We have seen excellent results in Perak and the river is now rated Class III — fish can survive in it but you still cannot swim in it," says Saw.

He sounds proud, and understandably so, as it was no mean feat, seeing that the river runs through a city and is subject to various levels of pollution.

On the significance of the word "spark", Saw says, "We can't just focus on cleaning one river! What we want to do is generate or spark a revolution — if I may use that word — and build momentum to spread awareness across the country. If more people become aware and more people



River quality testing forms part of the WATER Project's initiatives



Community members working together on habitat creation efforts for Sungai Way, through a river-within-a-river concept

want change, then we will have change."

He hopes that creating awareness among civil society will, where necessary, encourage them to pressure the authorities to do more. "I must say all the councils and agencies that we worked with have been very responsive. They really want to make a change ... work is being done all over the country but we need to do more."

With its recent rebranding, the foundation hopes to ignite change, particularly among the youth. "I think young people have played a part. They are more aware and committed than the young of yesteryear. Those days, we didn't have to worry about so many things — we just swam in the rivers!" Saw says, laughing heartily.

On the future of water conservation and river rehabilitation, he advocates good old-fashioned teamwork. "It can be as simple as just saving water when doing the dishes or washing the car."

According to Saw, a Class III river status is a practical goal to work towards. It is worth noting that some countries, for example Japan, have achieved an impressive Class I.

Despite Spark's impactful journey thus far, Saw does not, even for a moment, think that the efforts of the foundation alone can solve the nation's water-related woes. "If all of us — the community, businesses and the government — did our bit, it would have a tremendous impact on our country."

That said, considering the success Spark Foundation has had in river rehabilitation over the last decade, it is undoubtedly a key piece of the jigsaw puzzle. ■

For full details of how you can volunteer at or partner the foundation, visit sparkfoundation.com.my