

Headline	NATIONAL PRIDE		
MediaTitle	The Edge		
Date	29 Aug 2022	Color	Full Color
Section	Options	Circulation	25,910
Page No	OP1,OP16TOOP21	Readership	77,730
Language	English	ArticleSize	7175 cm²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 123,538
Frequency	Weekly	PR Value	RM 370,614





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# NATIONAL

At a glittering afternoon ceremony, winners of the biennial Merdeka Award were announced across six categories



From left: Samuel Isaiiah, Datuk Dr Annabel Teh Gallop, Faizal Parish, Datuk Professor Dr Adeeba Kamaruzaman, Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Siti Zuraina Abdul Majid and Chan Choon Seng



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# PRIDE

ALL STORIES BY ANANDHI GOPINATH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SOOPHYE



## MERDEKA AWARD

**T**he Merdeka Award was established on Aug 27, 2007, to recognise and reward individuals and organisations whose works and achievements have not only contributed to the nation's growth but also inspired greatness in the people. This prestigious award honours their outstanding effort and role in living the "Merdeka" spirit across six categories — including a new one launched this year — while highlighting the contributions they make to Malaysia as a whole.

Calling it the Merdeka Award reflects the aim of the founding members of Merdeka Award Trust — Petronas, ExxonMobil and Shell (ExxonMobil exited in 2021) — to commemorate the true spirit of independence, which transcends the conventional definition of national sovereignty. It explores the liberation of the mind and spirit — factors that foster the realisation of human potential and the pursuit of excellence. As the awards celebrate its 15th anniversary this year, it has successfully highlighted the work of 57 individuals and six organisations that have more than played their part in raising the profile of the nation while making meaningful contributions to its continued development.

In the past, awards had been given out in the categories of Education and Community, Environment, Health, Science and Technology, Outstanding Scholastic Achievement and Outstanding Contribution to the People of Malaysia. This year, the Anugerah Harapan Merdeka was introduced to recognise the efforts of Malaysians aged 40 years old and below or Malaysian organisations less than 10 years in the areas of education and community, environment, health, science and technology.

Petronas president and group CEO Datuk Tengku Muhammad Taufik, who is a member of the Merdeka Award Board of Trustees, said, "The Merdeka Award recognises and rewards those who embody the spirit and heart of 'Merdeka' — individuals and organisations who epitomise perseverance, emerging with an enduring purpose to improve the prosperity and progress of our people, as well as the well-being of society at large. Many recipients continue their inspiring work with great passion, striving to create a sustainable future for all. They pave the way for us even as we navigate unprecedented challenges, all the while fostering a culture of excellence."

Ivan Tan, Shell Malaysia country chairman and senior vice-president of Malaysia Upstream and also part of the Merdeka Award Board of Trustees, added, "The continuous dedication and courageous efforts of our laureates in bringing change for communities, societies and the planet are truly commendable. As trailblazers, they lay a solid foundation in delivering a better future for Malaysia — and this path will set many others up for greater things ahead."

As the crowd drifted into the main ballroom of the Grand Hyatt Kuala Lumpur ahead of the awards ceremony on Aug 19, the excitement was palpable. Although news of the winners had already broken, it was hard to miss the sense of anticipation in the room. The Merdeka Awards' six winners — Teach for Malaysia, Global Environment Centre, pioneering archaeologist Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Siti Zuraina Abdul Majid, infectious disease specialist Datuk Professor Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman, historian Datuk Dr Annabel Teh Gallop and educator Samuel Isaih — looked suitably excited themselves, thrilled to be associated with the prestige of the award and take home a cash prize that will allow them to continue their good work.

"As I consider the list of 63 laureates who have been conferred the Merdeka Award, I am inspired by those who continue to push the envelope and make all efforts to foster a culture of excellence. Many are ahead of their time, and giants in their fields but remain humble in their pursuit of progress," shared patron and chairman of the Merdeka Award Trust, Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah of Perak.

"Such major achievements generally do not come about without some sacrifice, of course. There may have been times when our laureates wavered, especially if the path towards their goals are pitted with trials. Yet, they retain their strong sense of mission, remaining resolute, determined and driven. They are remarkable and admirable people. With persistence and foresight, they have pioneered new approaches to tackle issues affecting society and the planet. Through their efforts, they are helping humanity to survive and thrive from one generation to the next."

Indeed, if there was one unifying aspect among the six winners this year, it is that each of them did what they did without thinking of themselves — their work is born from a pure love for what they do and for the nation. This is no race to the top, but a long marathon toward building a better Malaysia for us all and, for that reason, each winner well and truly deserves this award and the respect and regard that comes with it.

As we profile the 2022 winners, we hope you are as inspired as we are by their stories of passion, integrity and love for Malaysia. What a way to celebrate the independence of our nation.



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## Outstanding scholastic achievement

Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Siti Zuraina Abdul Majid

Since the 1970s, Emeritus Professor Datuk Dr Siti Zuraina Abdul Majid has been laying the foundation for the development of archaeology as a discipline in Malaysia. The impact of her findings eventually led Universiti Sains Malaysia to set up the Centre for Archaeological Research Malaysia, which has produced a new generation of archaeologists at master's and PhD levels. As the pioneer of a multidisciplinary research approach in the field of archaeology, she also established the Department of National Heritage, that aims to safeguard Malaysia's historical heritage.

"It was very tough to establish because people were not aware of the fields and decision-makers found this to be a very new idea," she relates. "I'm fortunate that my discoveries helped me convince them, and foreign researchers who came to my site added credibility to my work."

Zuraina's well-known archaeological discoveries in the Lenggong Valley, which consist of Kota Tampan (a Palaeolithic stone tool artifact site) and the Perak Man (a Palaeolithic skeleton), prove the existence of the first "capital" of Malaysia and one of the two earliest habitations in Southeast Asia, thus putting the country on the archaeological world map. The Perak Man also revealed the world's earliest evidence of a rare deformity from birth, Brachymesopha Type A2. At the same time, the discovery of the Perak Man led to the first-ever revelation of a Palaeolithic burial ritual in Southeast Asia, which subsequently enriched the historical records of our nation and the region. Furthermore, through a stringent and thorough examination and research in 2012, she successfully obtained a Unesco World Heritage Site status for Lenggong Valley.

Kota Tampan is particularly important because of the attention it obtained internationally. "It was 1988 in Paris at an archaeological conference when I received a standing ovation for the discovery of Kota Tampan. This was especially significant because it was at a time when Malaysia was regarded as a laggard in archaeology, barren of archaeological interest, unlike the rest of Southeast Asia. We were regarded as unimportant. Suddenly, Malaysia jumped to the forefront."

"To me, Kota Tampan is also special because it answers questions that weren't addressed for many years. It is along the route of early man in his movement around the world," she adds. "Kota Tampan provided the evidence researchers were looking for. It also revealed how early man made tools in a tropical climate, which is different from how it was done in Europe. It's a very significant discovery and there were archaeologists coming from all over the world to see it."

After fighting for visibility for so many years, Zuraina says the Merdeka Award will help her tremendously to further elevate the profile of her profession. "Firstly, recognising a field that has been underground is great," she quips. "It's fantastic because we have proven that Malaysia has global importance in this field and it highlights this fact yet again — it helps me explain what archaeology can do. This is an award for all Malaysians as

## Health, science and technology

Datuk Professor Dr Adeeba Kamarulzaman

When *Options* first interviewed Prof Datuk Adeeba Kamarulzaman in 2019, she was preparing to take on the presidency of the International Aids Society, the world's largest association of HIV/AIDS professionals with 11,600 members from over 170 countries. She is the first person from Asia to take on this role, following in the footsteps of giants such as Nobel Prize winner Françoise Barré-Sinoussi, who is credited with discovering the virus; Helen Gayle, who served as chair of the Obama administration's advisory council on HIV/AIDS; and Linda-Gail Bekker, president and CEO of the Desmond Tutu HIV Foundation.

"I feel like I drew the short straw, being president during the pandemic," she quips. "It was very challenging on many fronts, not least of which was my own time as I was dealing with the Covid-19 situation here in Malaysia. But I'm proud to say I managed to steer the organisation through these challenging times, working virtually with the team in Geneva. We managed to run all the scheduled programmes we planned, culminating in a huge conference in Montreal recently, which also marked the end of my presidency."

Known worldwide for her work in HIV/AIDS research, one of Adeeba's most critical accomplishments is the establishment of the Infectious Diseases Unit and Centre of Excellence for Research in AIDS at Universiti Malaya, one of the few centres in the region that is dedicated to HIV/AIDS research. CERIA runs activities that encompass clinical and basic science studies, and epidemiological as well as socio-behavioural research focusing on marginalised communities in Malaysia. It has managed to attract many local and international research grants, including from the Ministry of Higher Education, the National Institutes of Health, US, the Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR) and the World Bank.

Her advocacy work has led to a 50% reduction in the rate of new HIV/AIDS

infections in the past decade through a combination of opioid substitution therapy and a needle syringe exchange programme. She also reformed existing drug policies and successfully advocated for a public health approach that decriminalises drug users, as well as harm-reduction programmes that protect the life, health and dignity of people with drug addiction and their communities while preventing HIV transmission among drug users.

Although in the last decade we have continually managed to reduce the rate of new infections, the Covid-19 pandemic has dealt a huge blow to this progress — both locally and on a global level. "Unsurprisingly, reports show that the amazing strides we had made to reduce infections globally has slowed down and we won't be able to reach the target we set ourselves to end HIV/AIDS by 2030. Our target for 2021 was only 500,000 new infections, but unfortunately, we reached 1.5 million," she says. "In Malaysia, the new infection rate is about 3,500 new cases per year, against the background of a good 10-year period of reducing infections. Several factors caused the numbers to go up — lockdowns meant people couldn't get tested and treated, but there are many other aspects to this."

Now that her presidency of the International Aids Society has ended, Adeeba plans to throw herself into some projects that were neglected during the pandemic. "For HIV, I plan to focus on the prison project we have going, and I will be assisting my colleagues on increasing self-testing and the distribution of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis). Outside of that, I will be working on vaccine hesitancy, some research on long Covid-19, and through the ROSE programme, women with cancer and HIV as well."

Receiving the Merdeka accolade is a bright spark indeed in what has been a difficult year. "We've all felt so burnt out and I think this award will rejuvenate me and make me work harder to achieve my goals."

**“We’ve all felt so burnt out and I think this award will rejuvenate me and make me work harder to achieve my goals.”**

**“You don’t have to join the profession but pursue the field for the rich sense of time and space the study of archaeology endows you with.”**



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it recognises the significance of the prehistory of a land so full of natural resources that it has sustained human life for hundreds of thousands of years."

Interestingly, Zuraina encourages people to study archaeology not necessarily to join the profession, but merely for the love of the discipline. "Archaeology is a very good field to train your mind. Science is specific, the arts is general — archaeology has one foot in both. The training it gives the mind is superb because it has no disciplinary boundaries. When we discover something, we will go to anyone who has the technology or the means to help us decipher it."

"It teaches you how to think logically, how to think eventually, and you acquire a sense of time and space that no other discipline will give you. Why wouldn't employers want such people? Archaeology shouldn't be viewed just as a profession, but as a discipline that will benefit anyone. I hope the awards also highlight this — you don't have to join the profession but pursue the field for the rich sense of time and space the study of archaeology endows you with."

Today, Zuraina occupies her time working on the submission dossiers for FRIM (Forest Research Institute Malaysia) and Royal Belum to Unesco for their listing as world heritage sites — a process that takes multiple years to research and assemble. But her love for archaeology will never wane, neither will the value of her contribution to it. "The foundation has been laid in teaching, research and public awareness, which I hope will grow healthily as I leave the field. I hope excellence is maintained through meticulous excavations and multidisciplinary research, grounded in archaeological ethics. My wish is for the authorities to protect and communicate our findings on the nation's past to the public."



“I am constantly aware of how lucky I am, to have a rewarding job that I enjoy, which enables me to work on extraordinarily important historical materials.”

## Outstanding Contribution to the People of Malaysia

### Datuk Dr Annabel Teh Gallop

Head curator for Indonesian and Malay affairs in the South and Southeast Asia department of the British Library, Datuk Dr Annabel Teh Gallop may be based in London, but her heart is clearly in our part of the world. The world's leading expert in the study and history of ancient Malay letters and manuscripts, seals and documents since she completed her doctorate at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2002, the 61-year-old has travelled the world over the last three decades to promote manuscripts of the language in a way no one else has.

A human compendium and treasure trove of information on manuscripts in the Malay world, the Briton has surprised even Malay literary giants in Malaysia with her superior knowledge of the language and its history. From London to Singapore, Gallop lectures about these exquisite masterpieces with such eloquence and authority that any conference on Malay manuscripts, letters, documents and seals and the art of the Islamic book in Southeast Asia would be incomplete without her presence.

In 2019, she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy for her distinction in the humanities and social sciences for her work on the writing traditions, book cultures and the art of the Qur'an in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean world; Malay and Indonesian manuscripts, letters, documents and seals; and comparative Islamic diplomacies. Her most recent major project is the digitisation of priceless Malay documents to make them readily available to anyone interested in learning more.

"It's something that's been happening in all libraries all over the world," Gallop begins. "With the advent of the internet, our work has been totally transformed because it opened up possibilities that were unthinkable before. From the very first days of the library, we've had old Malay manuscripts and people would have to come to London to access what we had. With digitisation, you can put entire manuscripts on the internet and it can be read freely by anyone anywhere in the world, whether you're in Marang or Batu Gajah. It's been an absolute game changer, and it's expensive, so it's only possible by partnerships and donations."

The British Library is able to track who is reading these manuscripts, and has launched targeted campaigns to reach out to the relevant readers. Gallop would blog about each manuscript as it was being digitised, and these were then promoted on social media. "Facebook was a very effective way in engaging with audiences, particularly in Malaysia. We get statistics from where users are based. After the US, UK and India, our largest number of readers are from Malaysia, and then, Singapore. There have been hundreds of views each month since the manuscripts were digitised."

Digitisation also benefited Gallop and her team, who could then study the manuscripts more easily and, therefore, learn more about them. For example, only through digitisation did she make some major discoveries — one was that the names on manuscripts often refer to the artists who worked on the documents, and not necessarily the writers.

But to what end is this digitisation process, and how does it relate to the average Malaysian? Gallop says that outside of the traditional audiences like members of academia and researchers, there is a huge community of Malaysians that are avid history fans, and they enjoy being able to pore over these old manuscripts and discuss them in online forums. Again, Gallop says, social media has been critical in bringing together these individuals and providing them the space to engage with each other. "Some of the most rewarding exchanges I've had haven't been with officials, but individuals who want to find out the history of where they live and where they come from. There is a much bigger undercurrent than is generally recognised."

A good example is local publisher Buku Fixi, who picked up on *Hikayat Raja Babi* once it was digitised and found a scholar to translate the manuscript from Jawi to Rumi. The book is the only translation of the original manuscript, penned in 1775 and today, a copy of the book is in Gallop's possession. "The manuscripts have a major impact on society, people just take them and run with them. There is a much larger following for Malay manuscripts than is perceived."

One of her present projects is the art of the Quran in Southeast Asia — but rather than look at the text, she is studying the decoration in these manuscripts. "The text in the Quran is the same wherever you are from, but its decorations are different — when you look at one, you can tell where it is from, whether it is from Africa, China or Southeast Asia. In this region, there were certain centres of artistry, but what I've found is that the finest Quran manuscripts made in Southeast Asia are from Terengganu. They were so beautifully done that they were actually exported to neighbouring countries."

Over the years, Gallop has found that her work has extraordinary untold effects on people's identities and understanding of history. "I am constantly aware of how lucky I am, to have a rewarding job that I enjoy, which enables me to work on extraordinarily important historical materials," she says. "I am, therefore, always happy to hear when some of the outcomes of my research, which I try to disseminate widely through publications, exhibitions, talks, seminars and social media, are of interest and significance to Malaysians."



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## Anugerah Harapan Merdeka

### Samuel Isaiah

Samuel Isaiah would have never applied for the Global Teachers Prize award in 2018 if his mentor had not sat him down and made him realise that refusing to participate was actually selfish on his part — he was giving up the opportunity to profile the children he taught and the groundbreaking initiatives that made such a difference in their lives. “The Global Teachers Prize wasn’t about me, I realised. It was about my kids. It changed my perception on teaching awards in general,” he admits. “It wasn’t about pitching one teacher against the other and choosing the best, but about highlighting what is possible in education and sharing that knowledge so all children benefit from it.”

The award made him an advocate, which in some ways he already was — by the time news broke about his being shortlisted for the Global Teachers Prize, he had made major strides in upgrading pass rates and his students’ English proficiency at Sekolah Kebangsaan Runchang in Muadzam Shah, Pahang. The future of the indigenous schoolchildren had never been taken seriously, and the school was one of the worst-performing in the district until Isaiah started advocating for the students and pushing for real and effective change in the classroom.

Samuel — who graced the cover of *Options* in 2020 — left teaching in 2018 and moved into policymaking and development, putting into practice the knowledge he had gained from doing his masters’ degree and, of course, time in the classroom. Today, he is part of Pemimpin GSL, a non-profit that focuses on school leadership in the country. His own focus remains steadfastly on education for indigenous communities and how those

learnings can further benefit other school-going children in the country.

At present, he is leading a team to work with 30 Orang Asli schools in Perak, where for the next two years, they will train leaders and equip them with the capability to improve their schools. Samuel plans to expand this programme to reach out to all 98 Orang Asli schools in Malaysia and provide support and coaching to school leaders and teachers, so that they can ensure every child in their care has access to quality education and reaches their full potential.

Samuel is the first recipient of the newly introduced Anugerah Harapan Merdeka award, which was specially created for young Malaysians under the age of 40 who are making waves in their respective fields. “I’m so honoured to receive this award, and I hope this will inspire more individuals to become teachers, to take up the vocation. I hope

this showcases the work of teachers because if you want to develop a nation, you must start with developing better schools. I believe that this award will elevate the status of teachers in Malaysia.”

As a young man with the rest of his career ahead of him, Samuel is full of hope for the future. “My hopes and aspirations for the country — I think it’s quality education and that’s something I’m going to continually advocate for from different capacities,” he says. “We want to talk about unity, we want to talk about science and technology, but everything begins in school and this is something that I will continually advocate for. I’m working towards transforming schools, transforming teachers, equipping teachers and, hopefully in the near future, transform policies as well.”

“The Global Teachers Prize wasn’t about me, I realised. It was about my kids. It changed my perception on teaching awards in general.”

## Education and Community

Teach For Malaysia, represented by CEO Chan Soon Seng

Founded in 2010, Teach For Malaysia is an independent non-governmental organisation that recruits outstanding Malaysians into a two-year graduate leadership programme to make an immediate impact in high-need public schools across Malaysia. It is a member of the Global Education Network Teach For All, a collective of education organisations in over 59 countries worldwide. With a vision that all children in Malaysia will have the opportunity to realise their potential through quality education, Teach





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For Malaysia believes the power of learning can unlock the potential of every child. To that end, it is building a movement of leaders to have an immediate and long-term impact on high-need communities across the country.

"When Teach For Malaysia first started, we had this belief that all kids deserve quality education. But the way that we thought about quality education was really through this traditional lens that we typically use in Malaysia," CEO Chan Soon Seng says. "So, what we realised was what kids need actually is an education that will allow them to unlock the potential they choose for themselves, and so we really had to shift our focus to think about how we can have an education that's holistic and will allow students to become leaders of their learning and shift the perspective."

In 2020, Teach For Malaysia expanded its work to also coach in-service public school teachers with the Program Duta Guru, a collaboration between Yayasan Petronas and the Ministry of Education (MOE), through Pusat STEM Negara. It is a nationwide two-year industry-linked programme with the objective of empowering teachers to be highly competent and committed; serving as role models to enhance higher-order thinking skills through STEM education as a foundation to being a competitive nation.

"Teach For Malaysia is extremely proud to receive the Merdeka Award. We truly believe in the spirit of Merdeka and I think there's an aspect of independence that celebrates the idea of Malaysians taking charge of our destiny and our future as a nation. At Teach For Malaysia, we really believe that we can empower students all over this country to shape the future they want for themselves and, ultimately, for this nation. Bestowed with the Merdeka Award is something that we are really proud of and we are just so excited because we think this recognition is really going to enable us to further our mission and ensure that we impact thousands and thousands more students all over this country."

To date, Teach For Malaysia has impacted 164,200 students through partnerships with 308 schools, collaborated on 34 student-led initiatives that benefited 9,000 beneficiaries, launched 48 initiatives created by fellows and alumni for immediate student, community and system outcomes while also collaborating via public-private partnerships to scale their impact. To date, the organisation has recruited 448 fellows and alumni to participate in the Teach For Malaysia Fellowship, with 45% coming from the Top 200 universities worldwide.

"By far, being part of Teach For Malaysia has been one of the most outstanding experiences of my life," Chan adds. "It gave me an insight into the on-ground realities of so many children, the odds they face to get an education and the battles they have to fight to get ahead. It's inspirational. It also helped me understand what it means to serve — the country, the people and the community."

“What we realised was what kids need actually is an education that will allow them to unlock the potential that they choose for themselves.”

## Environment

Global Environment Centre, represented by founder and director Faizal Parish

When wetland ecologist and environmental management specialist Faizal Parish came to Malaysia 40 years ago, his plan was to stay for a week as he considered the possibilities of researching migratory birds along the coast. Man-made plans God often casts asunder, and he never went back to the UK. Instead, he became part of the local environmental activism scene. His work eventually led to the establishment of the Global Environmental Centre in 1998 to promote sustainable management of resources to meet local, regional and global needs through smart partnerships with communities and like-minded organisations. So successful is its model that since its founding, GEC has also established a footprint in all 10 Asean member states.

GEC's focus is on climate change mitigation and adaptation, biodiversity, water resources, agriculture and forestry. The organisation actively carries out assessments on peatlands and climate change, sustainable agriculture, forestry and plantation management, reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation as well as forest conservation and rehabilitation. A pioneer in community-driven conservation efforts, GEC has empowered more than 260 community groups and 700 education institutions through various strategic partnerships that aim to enhance their ability to safeguard and restore natural resources.

GEC is especially active in Selangor. Outside of mangrove conservation efforts along the coast and river basin management, it also focuses on taking care of the peatland forests, which are tropical moist forests where waterlogged soil prevents dead leaves and wood from fully decomposing, leaving behind a layer of rich, organic matter known as peat. Up to 22% of Selangor land masses are peat forests, and need to be protected for an important reason — fires and degradation of these areas release harmful greenhouse gases and cause transboundary haze.

"We've worked with a very broad range of partners on this and, as a result, we've been able to reduce by 95% the extent of peatland fires in Malaysia and get many stakeholders engaged in the restoration of degraded peatland sites," Parish shares. "In 2003, we were appointed by the Asean secretariat to provide technical operational support to each of the 10 member states to address the issue of fires and transboundary haze. It is the largest programme that we're working on at a regional level."

The Merdeka Award comes at the perfect time, Parish says, as it will shine a spotlight on their work and encourage more stakeholders to reach out and get involved. "We need to bring many more organisations' focus on the environment and sustainability. If we're going to tackle critical problems, whether its fire and haze or biodiversity degradation, we need multiple stakeholders working together. Unfortunately, here, as with other countries, each sector works in silos and different boxes, and often fights one another when there are issues. The key resource we need is trust to work together between sometimes

competing sectors. Otherwise, we cannot transform how things happen. Everyone needs to be looking in the same direction. We've seen successes with this, as peatland degradation reduced in Selangor owing to successful collaborations, and we need more of this sort of thing."

It is no secret that the work of an environmental activist will never be done, and Parish agrees. "We've seen some progress, but not enough. We are entering a climate crisis, which is an issue everyone around the world needs to work on. Malaysia is a mega-diversity country but we've been losing precious habitat very rapidly. When I came here 40 years ago, water was safe enough to drink directly from the tap and the rivers ran clean. We get 97% of our water from rivers and yet they are so polluted, which is a major area we need to take action on."

We circle back to the issue of partnerships, as Parish passionately believes it is the only sustainable way forward. "If we're going to have any hope of tackling the climate crisis, we really do need everyone on board and playing a part in trying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and also looking at better management for the future. We need to project 50 years into the future, anticipating major events like coastal erosion and flooding, and build that into the planning so we can adapt as well as

reduce the effects of climate change. Malaysia has in the past been a strong voice internationally in promoting sustainable development, and it must continue and be expanded. I hope the private sector sees the climate crisis not as a problem, but a chance to innovate for the future."



“We need to project 50 years into the future, anticipating major events like coastal erosion and flooding, and build that into the planning ...”