

Message from the Global Environment Centre on International Day for Conservation of Mangrove Ecosystem (July 26, 2023)

Today marks the celebration of the annual International Day for the Conservation of Mangrove Ecosystem adopted by the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2015. Celebrated annually on July 26, this day is dedicated to increase the awareness of mangrove ecosystems, their ecological importance and advance strategies for their conservation, restoration and sustainable management.

Mangroves are rare, spectacular and prolific ecosystems in the intertidal zones of tropical and subtropical regions. The trees have become specialised to thrive in high saline and anaerobic soil conditions through aerial root systems and salt-tolerant properties, which make mangroves the only species to survive in such extreme environments. The mangrove ecosystem is able to withstand strong waves and wind, protects the coastal communities and sequesters two to five times more carbon than the tropical forests. They also provide significant socio-economic benefits to coastal communities – with the net fisheries contribution amounting to US\$ 846/year on a unit hectare basis¹. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and climate change emergency revealed that mangroves are the frontliners that can bolster ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction and aid in climate change adaptation and mitigation.

According to the Global Mangrove Alliance 2022 report², more than 11,700km² of mangroves have been lost since 1996, making it one of the fast-vanishing ecosystems in the world. Since mangrove decimation is mainly catalysed by anthropogenic activities, the engagement of local communities in the restoration and conservation programmes is pivotal in harnessing better conservation results.

In Malaysia, Global Environment Centre (GEC) has been spearheading community-based mangrove conservation programmes since its establishment in 1998. The coastal communities are highly dependent on the mangrove forests and are regarded as the missing link to successful restoration and conservation effort. For the past 25 years, these communities have worked together with GEC in the protection and conservation of the local mangrove forests in Kedah, Penang, Selangor, Perak and Johor. To date, about 440,000 native mangrove trees have been planted by these communities across 212 ha of degraded areas throughout Malaysia, registering survival rates of up to 75 to 80%.

The community-based mangrove conservation and restoration requires commitment, perseverance and investment of time, effort and wealth to achieve the conservation goals. It will only become a reality if all stakeholders join forces to promote and support the protection and restoration of such vital ecosystems to protect Malaysia's and the planet's future.

This planet is not only a home for humans but is also shared by other living organisms that play a vital role in maintaining the ecological balance and quality of life of the universal community. Therefore, we should be a generation that is more sensitive to environmental issues and formulate a direction with actions to leave a healthy planet for future generations and biodiversity. Herein lies the objective of this day, where we must understand the importance and fragility of this ecosystem and commit ourselves to protect it from further degradation.

¹Chong, V. C. (2007). Mangroves-fisheries linkages—the Malaysian perspective. *Bulletin of Marine Science*, 80(3), 755-772.

² Leal, Maricé and Spalding, Mark D (editors), 2022 *The State of the World's Mangroves 2022*. Global Mangrove Alliance