Make your voice heard

The Malaysian Nature Society needs the support of all to preserve our environmental and natural heritage, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

***Raising awareness** in the young is something that Shan feels strongly about.* PICTURE BY SHIRAZ ALI

IN the news is a story that Earth is in the middle of its sixth mass extinction.

Dr Gerardo Ceballos of the National Autonomous University of Mexico and his colleagues have stated that humans will be the cause of the disappearance of close to half of all living species in the next 85 years.

This information casts a pall over the news that one of Malaysia's oldest environmental non-governmental organisations, the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), is celebrating its 75th birthday this year.

But IS Shanmugaraj Subramaniam, 40, the new MNS executive director, is not surprised by this Mexican study. After all, closer to home, 80 per cent of the oldest forest reserve, the Sungai Buloh Forest Reserve, has succumbed to deforestation in the name of development.

Oil palm plantations have replaced more than half a million hectares of forest in the peninsula. Almost all the freshwater swamp forests are gone. The Javan rhinoceros and green peafowl have been hunted to extinction and the Malayan tiger is almost extinct. What then is our legacy for the next generation?

CALL OF THE WILD

The son of a chief clerk in Sunggai Tinggi Estate, situated near Kuala Selangor Nature Park, Shan says that in the 1930s, a group of British expatriates decided that the abundant collection of field notes and natural history records which they'd accumulated was vital to the country's heritage and should be published.

In 1940, with the publication of the *Malayan Nature Journal Volume 1*, the Malaysian Nature Society was born.

Of his own childhood and youth, the father of one confides: "I was the naughty one. We're four brothers and I'm the second. Most of the time, we'd be playing in the rubber estate, fishing, chasing monkeys and cows or," and he breaks out into a cheeky grin, "stealing fruit — like when it's rambutan or mango season — from someone else's garden. That's the thrill."

Adding, he shares: "We never had to worry about the right shoes. Not like children now. We just wore those Japanese slippers and played in the rain. We felt cool in the forest. It was safe. No one bothered to look at the background of the children you're playing with. We just played."

When he completed his schooling, he pursued a course in computers, but the "call of the wild" was too strong. In 1994, he was offered a full-time post in the MNS and has been with it ever since.

GOOD OLD DAYS

"It was OK in the 1970s and 1980s," he says. "But from the 1990s, everyone became more materialistic. There was less agriculture and more industrialisation. We didn't realise what we're losing."

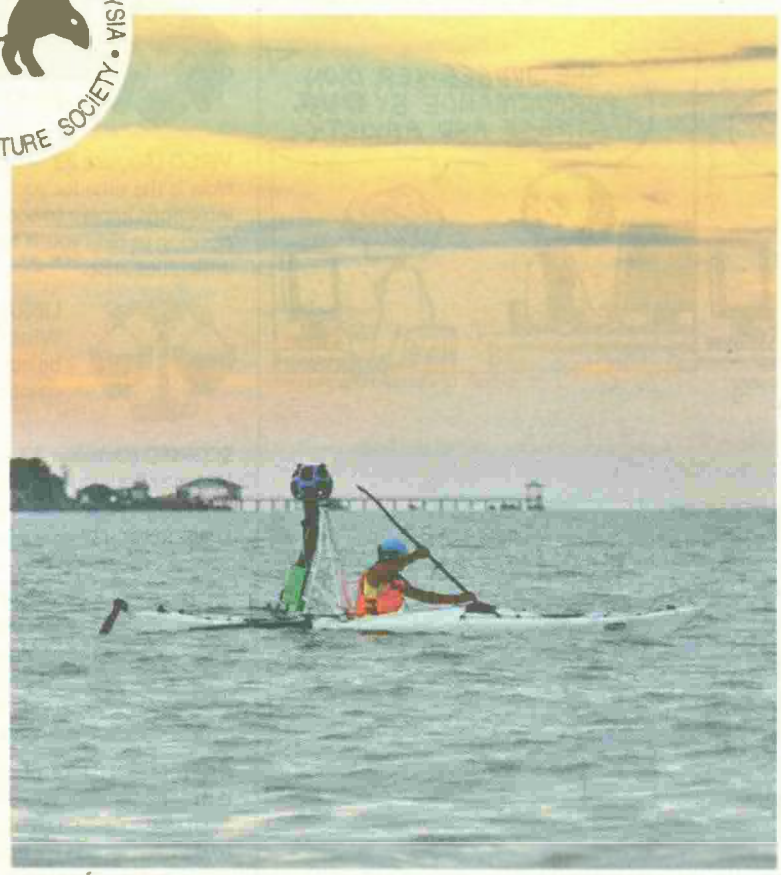
From what he has observed, the reason for the possibility of our impending environmental catastrophe is because of "the middlemen".

He explains: "Each state has to find its own source of revenue which can come from plantations to logging and so on. When the source of revenue involves the use of land, this becomes a state issue and is within the purview of the local councils. In the last 20 years, developers got their hands on these lands with a view to cultivating or developing it but employed foreigners to work on these lands."

Continuing, he points out: "We all know that if we cut down all our trees, we're destroying the environment. But when we tell people 'don't touch', the developers don't listen. The foreign workers they employ aren't interested in what's good for the land. For them, it's money first. No one cares that the land is being spoiled. If the Majlis (Councils) fines them, they'll pay up and do it all again."

Shan's point is very clear: We have the necessary laws and regulations to protect our natural heritage, but there's a lack of enforcement.

"Deforestation is a big problem," he adds. "With roads that are cut across the forest, developers have easy accessibility to the forest. It's also easy for the hunters to go in. Even old logging roads offer easy access for hunters."



For the Paddle for Nature project, MNS members and the public helped raise awareness for environmental issues.

*Mr Le Mare, seen here with his wife, was one of the **founding members** of MNS.*

SUCCESS STORIES

With such stories of doom and gloom, one wonders if our laws have ever been enforced. Shan is quick to respond that there have been times when the MNS has been triumphant and successful in its research, implementing policies, ensuring its message is heard and action taken against the wrong-doers.

Recounting stories about his time in Endau Rompin National Park and the Royal Belum-Temenggor Forest, he says he's been with groups which study wild ginger, the hornbill species and areas where big animals have become endemic.

He says: "We were involved in drawing up management plans for the parks. We show them how best to manage it and still be of benefit to the state. For instance, we'll say, 'you can build a research facility here, but don't log there'. Many foreigners with links to the local universities, come to study the animals and plants we have."

The MNS has played a key role in identifying, protecting and ensuring that parks in Malaysia are gazetted as "protected areas" including Kuala Selangor Nature Park, Endau Rompin State Park, Kota Damansara Community Forest (Sg. Buloh Forest Reserve) and the Royal Belum State Park.

The MNS is also involved with the monitoring of our marine life and coast. The most recent project was Paddle For Nature where, between October 2014 and March 2015, its members and the public mapped the activities along our shores to help increase awareness of our environmental issues.

ENTIRE HABITAT, NOT JUST A SPECIES

As a non-governmental organisation, one of the challenges the MNS faces is, of course, funding. It relies on membership of its society to continue to push its agenda. With pride, Shan says: "The MNS is a Malaysian membership-based society. When we make a statement, we're doing it for Malaysians. It's the voice of Malaysians that need to be heard."

The MNS has 14 branches in the country, with its headquarters in KL. Its aim is to expand its current network of Kelab Pencinta Alam to 500 schools to reach out to the young and, hopefully, increase its membership to over 15,000 students.

With a huge smile, Shan says: "In the late 1990s, we carried out a programme with a school in Pasir Puteh in Kelantan. We had volunteer teachers coordinate the programme with the students."

The school adopted a lake in the area and the students made it their mission to convert it to a green area.

"They examined the area, went to the lake and saw that it had become a dumping ground. So they made leaflets and created an awareness programme for the people in the area to start doing something to protect the lake before it died. There was so much garbage in the area," says Shan.

The project took about two years, but as a result the councils began to take notice and implemented plans to have the waste properly managed or diverted altogether.

To emphasise the need for people, Malaysians in particular, to join the MNS, Shan says it's one of the few societies that protects the entire habitat, not just a species.

He says: "If you're protecting the tiger, tapir or Malayan sun bear, it's good. But where will they go if we get rid of their homes? If the forests are destroyed, then what?"

Sign up as a member of the MNS at http://www.mns.my/