

Planting the seeds of change

Exploring Sustainable Development



with Dr Goh Chun Sheng

ON March 31, 2023, I had the privilege of speaking to over a thousand students from Kuching High School and Chung Hua Middle School No. 1 about the urgent issue of climate change.

It was an honour to address these young and ambitious individuals who will soon inherit our planet. It is crucial that they understand the reality of what is happening, the monster we have created that is now threatening our very existence.

Climate change is a matter that concerns every one of us, yet many may not fully comprehend the magnitude of the situation. Sarawak, home to these young people, is filled with wonder – from the soaring mountains and mighty rivers to the joyful city of Kuching.

For years, our youths have lived comfortable lives, not giving much thought to what the future may hold.

Sundaland, Holocene, and sea level change

To better engage with the students and give them an impression about sea level changes, I started by narrating the story of Sundaland that links my hometown, Penang, with Kuching. I was pleased to see some hands raised when I asked if anyone had visited Penang, a small dot compared to Sarawak.

Millions of years ago, Penang and Kuching were connected by land, as the sea level was much lower during glacial periods. The Sunda Shelf was exposed, and a sub-continent called Sundaland emerged, including Borneo, Peninsular Malaysia, Java, Sumatra, and other areas. One could theoretically walk from Kuching to Penang. The water that now separates us was once locked up in massive ice sheets on the northern and southern hemisphere.

Around 12,000 years ago, we entered a new geological epoch called the Holocene. As the planet became warmer, the massive ice sheets melted away. Sadly, Kuching and Penang were then separated by the South China Sea. However, this is how Borneo became the world's third-largest island. New forests emerged, and life thrived in the relatively warmer and stable climate.

Humans have been around for two million years, but we have never had such a good time as the Holocene. In the last 11,000 years, we have made the most of it. We grew crops, made things, and exchanged them with each other. We built towns and villages, created art, and even formed grand civilizations.

Things were going pretty well for us – our ancestors began clearing forests to grow more crops and expand their territories, but much of the world was still covered in thick forests. Our impact on the environment was still relatively small.

The Industrial Revolution, carbon cycle, and climate change

Then, I introduced the students to the Industrial Age – a significant turning point in human history that started around 260 years ago. Prior to this era, hand-held tools were the primary means of work. However, with the introduction of machines, new possibilities emerged, including mass production of goods. Unfortunately, this progress came at a great cost, as industrialisation led to the creation of the monster of climate change.

In this context, climate change refers to the relatively rapid rise in the Earth's temperature caused by an increase in greenhouse gases, primarily carbon dioxide, in the atmosphere due to human activities. Fossil fuels, such as coal, oil, and gas, are the remains of ancient plants and animals, primarily composed of carbon and naturally part of the slow carbon cycle.

However, by extracting and burning these fuels to power our machines, we have released vast amounts of ancient carbon into the fast carbon cycle, causing a substantial increase of carbon

dioxide in the atmosphere. The greenhouse gases act like a blanket, trapping heat and causing the Earth's temperature to rise.

It matters: Water, food, air, and health

Over the past two centuries, the Earth has experienced a temperature rise of over one degree Celsius, resulting in changes that make many regions less liveable. The impacts of this warming are vast and include the melting of glaciers, which leads to rising sea levels, as well as significant disruptions in the Earth's systems.

Heatwaves are becoming more frequent and intense, resulting in significant health risks, particularly for vulnerable populations. In 2015, for example, over 2,000 people died in India due to a heatwave.

While our younger generations are so used to being indoors or having air conditioning, no one is exempt from the impacts of climate change. I used four examples to drive this point home.

Prolonged droughts can turn a simple shower or toilet flush into a luxury due to water scarcity. Crop failures causing food shortages can severely restrict your dietary options – you may not have your laksa whenever you want like now. Landscape fires resulting in air pollution can have detrimental effects on your health. Worse still, the loss of wildlife habitats may result in new pandemics, similar to the nightmare of Covid-19 that we experienced.

Hopes: Technologies, nature-based solutions, and behavioural changes

The kids looked worried, but I reassured them that there is still hope. With innovative technologies such as solar and wind power, it is possible to

eradicate the use of harmful fossil fuels and achieve a sustainable energy system by 2050. However, it is essential to recognise that significant challenges remain, especially in terms of implementation.

I then introduced nature-based solutions to the students, using the example of whale poop that I had previously shared in one of my column articles. Whales act as bio-pumps, maintaining the nutrient and carbon cycle of the sea through their excrement. This story serves as a reminder that nature can regulate itself if we avoid disrupting it and fix the damage we have done.

I also shared the stinky story of the horse dung crisis in an earlier article, emphasising that behavioural changes are key to addressing difficult problems. The crisis was not solved by mass-producing cars with Ford's assembly lines but by re-organising cleaners to do the job with shovels.

This has important implications for the climate crisis – simple, old-fashioned hard work that is achievable by every individual, such as reducing food waste, limiting the use of plastics, and optimising electricity usage, can have a significant impact.

Before closing, I emphasised that tackling climate change requires a mix of innovative technologies, nature-based solutions, and behavioural changes. Youths have a critical role to play and must acknowledge their responsibility in inheriting the planet.

"You are going to run the world in 10-20 years. The world is yours. It is really up to you."

Dr Goh Chun Sheng is a researcher at Harvard University. He is interested in exploring sustainable development in both Malaysian and Indonesian Borneo.

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Dr Kajel addresses the press conference.

High time to formulate food waste law for Earth Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR: It is time for Malaysia to formulate specific law on food waste as it would demonstrate the country's commitment in addressing this critical global problem, says Earth Malaysia 2022 Dr Kajel Kaur Gill.

She said a new law on excess food should be formulated with has been long overdue in Malaysia and hoped the current unity government led by Prime Minister Datuk Anwar Ibrahim will make all necessary efforts to formulate a law that could promote sustainable practices throughout the food supply chain.

"We live in a country that produces delicious food and most of it is discarded edible food which is a significant issue that contributes to food waste."

"As such, the only way to reduce the habit of wasting food in our society is by having an effective law that can promote sustainable practices."

"Formulating a law on food waste in Malaysia would provide a comprehensive legal framework to tackle the environmental, social, and economic challenges posed by food waste," she said.

She added that it is also in line with the country's commitment to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 12, which focuses on responsible consumption and production.

Dr Kajel, who is waiting to start her housemanship, was invited to this to Bernama during a press conference held recently to announce the updates of Earth Malaysia 2023 being pageant.

Also in attendance was the pageant's national director, Joshua Benedict.



Move to extend e-wallet aid to varsity students shows govt values student voice

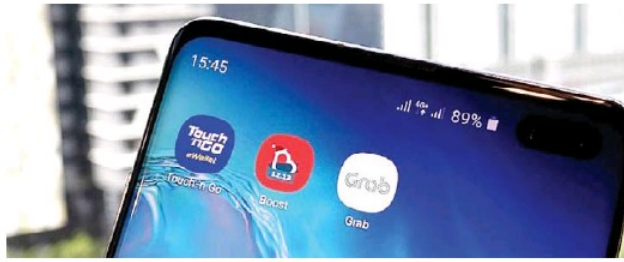
KUALA LUMPUR: The decision to extend the 2023 e-Wallet assistance to all eligible university students shows that the government realises the importance of student voice and that the group needs assistance regardless of their age.

National Student Consultative Council (MPPK) secretary-general Rasydan Mohd Hassan said that the initiative was relevant in line with the intake of university students who are not only 18 to 20 years old, as some are beyond that age.

"If we only classify students under a few age groups, it may not be fair to those who are undergraduates and do not belong to the age group," he told Bernama.

Rasydan said that the RM200 assistance could to some extent ease the financial burden of students in higher learning institutions.

Meanwhile, International Islamic University of Malaysia student union president, Aliff Naif Mohd Fizam, said by extending the aid, the government has taken an inclusive approach to guarantee



The move to extend the 2023 e-wallet aid to all eligible university students in the country will to some extent ease the financial burden of students in higher learning institutions, regardless of their age, says MPPK. — Malay Mail photo

the welfare of students.

"This initiative shows that the government does not discriminate against students who are in need," he said.

Aliff Naif said university students have no income and their study period requires at least four years, therefore the decision to widen the recipient group would be able to help more people.

A Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Hotel and Tourism Management student, Siti Sarah Zulkifli, 24, said the government's decision could benefit more

students including those who are married like her.

"I got married two months ago and my husband, who is 24, is in the final year of his degree course. When the government announced the RM200 aid we were relieved and thankful as we need the additional funds for our studies and other needs.

On April 7, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim announced that the government has extended the 2023 e-wallet aid to all eligible university students in the country, to ensure the aid benefits the group concerned. — Bernama

Former journalist shares as mental health patient

CYBERJAYA: A former journalist who used to suffer from a rather severe mental health disorder has produced a book to share her experience.

Maliah Surip, 42, said the book, 'Senandika: Bercakap Seorang Diri' which she wrote over a period of three months, is about her life after being diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Panic Attacks and Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), as well as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) in 2019.

She said she became depressed following a bad dream she had while performing the umrah pilgrimage about 10 years ago, without realising that she was actually traumatised by the incident.

"The dream traumatised me, but by keeping that feeling to myself and not sharing it with others, it haunted me and from then on made me more depressed until it went out of control," she told Bernama after the launch of the book by popular entertainers Datuk Amy Search and Misha Omar at DXN Cyberville, here, recently.

The mother of three children aged between seven and 13 said she realised the problem only after she took a Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS) self-test through a programme organised

at her office.

"All the while, I thought my behaviour of preferring to be alone in the room, feeling insecure and afraid and not wanting to be around other people was normal, that was because I was lazy.

"It never came to my mind that it was actually a mental health problem," she added.

Despite realising her unstable condition, Maliah said she refused to undergo treatment until she had to quit her job as her condition was becoming more serious than she could handle.

"I was still in denial, even when I had all the symptoms, including a fast heartbeat and not being able to sleep well, as well as wanting to just disappear and end my life."

"At that time, my husband, Abdul Razak Latif and our children realised that there was something wrong with me. I neglected them, and couldn't get up in the morning. All I did was just lie in bed, didn't eat, and didn't sleep.

"The period during my Mental Health Movement Control Order was the happiest moment because there was no need for me to communicate face-to-face. I spent most of the time in my room," she said, adding that during difficult times, her husband and children were always with her.

"Alhamdulillah, my husband

