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THERE'S no other way to say it: At the start of an early morning walk in Kuala Selangor Nature Park, we're about to become a buffet for the mosquitoes. Although we douse ourselves in insect repellent and try to avoid the many monkeys eager to snatch anything they can, hundreds of mosquitoes advance in a great swarm. Still in good spirits, we step onto the trail and begin our journey.

The walk is part of a workshop to instil awareness among 23 participants about conserving our natural heritage.

The participants comprise students from various private and government institutions of higher learning. At the end of the workshop, 10 of them will receive a grant worth RM10,000 based on proposals they submitted for the Young Environmental Research Grant (YERG) launched in April 2016 by the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS).

The aim of YERG is to inculcate a sense of appreciation and conservation of Malaysia's natural heritage through science and research. The money will be given to the researchers periodically over a one-year period. At the completion of this tenure, they'll have to present their research findings at a conference to be organised next year.

THREE ECOSYSTEMS

Our guide, Asokumar Rajadurai (Ashok), is a Park Officer in the Environmental Education Division of the park. Having worked here for the past nine years, one of the first things the passionate conservationist explains is that there are three kinds of ecosystems in the Kuala Selangor Nature Park: Secondary forest, the brackish lake system and the mangrove trees in a swamp. There are over a 150 species of birds that make bird watching a popular activity in the park.

Halfway inside the secondary forest, we stop suddenly. Bending down, Ashok picks up a fallen flower and gives it to a young participant, Rekha Krishnan.

"This is the sea hibiscus," he says and gives some details about the flower to the group. We proceed with our walk and upon



WALKWAY TO CONSERVATION

A walk in a nature park inspires a group of researchers to conserve our natural heritage, writes Aneeta Sundararaj

reaching the brackish lake Ashok stops again to point to something in the distance. "Those birds," he says, "are Brahminy Kites." According to the 31-year-old native of Kuala Selangor, this is the bird that's been immortalised as a statue on the island of Langkawi.

We continue along the trail and Rekha shares that she's a "kampung girl" at heart. She reveals that since she grew up on a farm in Johor, she has been close to nature all her life. Although she considers the cows her father looks after as her pets, she's too shy to reveal the names she's given many of them. Instead, she chooses to explain her passion about conservation efforts, saying: "I want to improve myself.

Action speaks louder than words. When we can see a relationship between animals and plants, [we mustn't] destroy them. We should protect them."

PRECIOUS MANGROVES

No doubt, one of the most important things not to destroy is our mangroves. They act as a buffer zone between the forces of the sea and the land of the peninsula. They absorb the energy and are storm breakers. They're also carbon sinks which are a natural environment known for their ability to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

We reach the entrance to the trail that will take us into the mangrove. Before we

can enter, however, Ashok insists that we walk further ahead along the trail for a surprise he has in store. When we reach the nursery, he explains that he wants us to plant around 130 saplings of the Rhizophora plant. This is a genus of tropical mangrove tree that "generally live in intertidal zones which are inundated daily by the ocean".

The participants are also expected to harvest five saplings themselves. Stepping out of the way and allowing the participants to enter the nursery, Ashok lowers his voice and says: "Let's see what happens. I want to know how they'll cope with this."

All the participants pull on their gloves then gingerly make their way into the

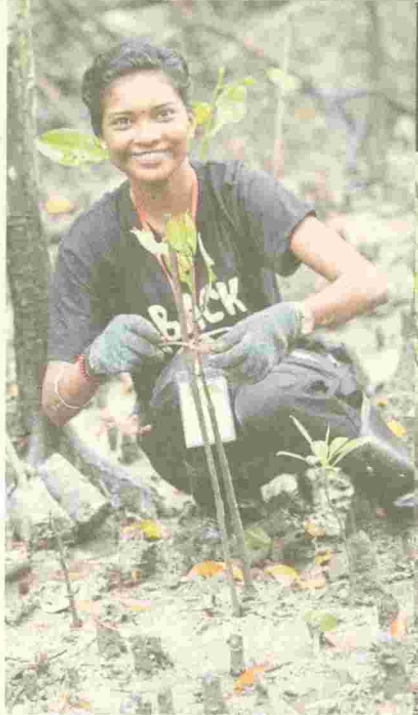
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Clockwise from below: 130 Saplings being planted; Learning about our precious ecosystems; Rekha Krishnan believes that action speaks louder than words; Young environmentalists; The sea hibiscus; New life.

In 30 years, if someone wants to get rid of these trees, you can fight with them and say 'No, you can't get rid of them. I planted these trees.'

Asokumar Rajadurai



nursery. A minute later, there's a piercing scream. We turn to look only to see one of the girls about to fall face first into the mud. A strapping young lad grips her arm and prevents this catastrophe. Moments later, an idea has taken root. Some of the participants have formed a human chain to carry the saplings from the nursery to the path. Delighted, a beaming Ashok says: "This is what I like to see. They're all co-operating with each other."

PLANTING 'CHILDREN'

Once the participants have all they need, the entire group walks into the mangrove. At a designated plot, each participant then descends into the swamp proper and

begins to plant these trees under Ashok's guidance. The ensuing silence as the participants focus on the task at hand is punctuated only by the squelching of mud under Wellington boots and a faint crash of waves from the sea some distance away.

Throughout the process, Ashok encourages them with words like: "Not easy to plant, but it's easy to chop," and "In 30 years, if someone wants to get rid of these trees, you can fight with them and say 'No, you can't get rid of them. I planted these trees.'" True enough, once the saplings have been planted, Hansen SeowYee Loon says: "It was like I was planting my children."

The 23-year-old from Inti International University is quite certain that in the years

to come, he'll bring his yet unborn children to come visit their "elder siblings" in this mangrove. "I'll tell them not to be jealous," he says, amidst much laughter.

Acknowledging that these workshops are fun and interesting, he adds that they allow researchers like him who've been stuck in laboratories for a long time to connect with nature once again. "They're reintroducing us to the woods," says Hansen.

Once all the saplings are planted, Ashok informs us that since 2006, over 30,000 trees have been planted in this nature park. He adds: "But quantity isn't important. It's the teamwork and planting process that is."

START SOMEWHERE

As we leave the mangrove swamp and make our back to the mosquitoes-infested secondary forest, the exhausted participants reflect on their plans for the future.

For mud-splattered post-graduate student, Noor Shahirah Mohd Ibrahim,

the moment she decided to abandon the idea of becoming a doctor and chose, instead, to focus on studying ecology, she "found herself." Today, the 24-year-old post-graduate student feels that part of any research should include an ecological study on the knowledge of the locals about their environment. The example she gives is tortoises. She says: "Do the locals know that if they send all the tortoises to the Chinese restaurants, there'll be none left?"

When the reality is pointed out that, sometimes, the economic benefits derived from unscrupulous consumers of exotic animals and illegal wildlife trade outweigh conservation efforts, Shahirah's idealism is dampened somewhat. In the next moment, though, the native of Perak brightens up.

She glances around then sums up the sentiment shared by many of the participants of this walk: "Yes. But we have to start somewhere."