

Walk through a Malaysian rainforest

The Save Our Rainforest Race 2014 aims to safeguard our rainforests, which are disappearing at an alarming rate, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

THE word 'race' doesn't mean that this event is a race like others," begins Puan Sri Shariffa Sabrina Syed Akil, president of PEKA Malaysia, (Pertubuhan Pelindung Khazanah Alam Malaysia or Association for the Protection of Natural Heritage of Malaysia). She is elaborating on its Save Our Rainforest Race 2014 to be held at Hutan Simpan (forest reserve), Sungai Besi, KL.

"Our race is against time. This is a 10km walk. And our wish is to save our rainforests. Did you know that our rainforests are among the oldest in the world? There is such biodiversity and if we don't look after them, we will surely lose them."

The race is aimed at replanting lost forests and getting bigger involvement from the public and corporate sectors. To this end, PEKA will be collaborating with the Forestry Department Peninsular Malaysia to create an arboretum at the site of the race. Furthermore, each participant will be encouraged to plant a sapling during the walk to help create awareness about the importance of conserving our rainforests.

INDISCRIMINATE DEVELOPMENT

Shariffa Sabrina then whips out her tablet and opens a webpage.

"Look at that," says the 52-year-old, pointing to a graph. "Malaysia is reported as having the highest rate of forest loss between 2000 and 2012.

Can you see how much we're losing our forests?"

She adds: "We can't save the tigers and the elephants if we don't have any forests for them to live in."

Perhaps, her more important point is this: "Water comes from rain. If there are no forests, there is no rain. No rain, no water. And human beings can't live without water."

She asks: "And the forests are flattened for what? For development? Look at what's happening to places like Penang. I was born and brought up there. I still remember being able to go down to the beach near Padang Kota. Now, you can't even go there. What's the point of wanting tourists when there's nothing there except buildings and dirty beaches?"

This mother of five is not against development per se. "It's the indiscriminate development that bothers me. They (developers) just flatten the ground. They bulldoze everything in sight without thinking of how this will affect the surrounding area."

Development should be sustainable. "For example," says Shariffa Sabrina, "if you're going to build a house or a resort on a land that has trees, build around these trees. There's no point flattening it."

The domino effect of such an action is that when you cut the tree down and remove its roots, there's nothing to hold the soil together.

It becomes loose and when it rains, there are bound to be landslides.

"There was a time when landslides were an act of God. Today, they're more likely to be the act of Man," she adds.

OUR COMPLACENCY

Shariffa Sabrina then holds a bottle of water and repeats her biggest worry—that when we cut down all our trees we will lose our source of water.

"A big tree can hold up to 1,515 litres of water. I'm talking about trees with a circumference of about 70cm. I've been told that you can calculate



Shariffa Sabrina at Resort Tanah Aina Farrah Soraya Raub, Pahang.

the age of a tree by looking at this measurement. So, 1cm is equal to one year. Seventy means this tree is 70 years old. We do have such trees, but they're getting less and less every year.

"As Malaysian citizens, I feel it's our responsibility to look after what we have."

What's the point of making and having so much money if we don't have clean water? What's the point of building shopping centre after shopping centre when our children have to wear masks to go out to play? Where exactly are we heading if we cut down all our trees?"

Putting her hand up, she says: "And please don't tell me we have done reforestation because we have planted oil palms. They're not rainforests. In just 100 metres of rainforest, you'll see close to 100 types of trees. You'll come across multiple species of insects, flora and fauna. The trees are so old and their roots are intertwined in such beautiful ways."

She then compares Malaysia with New Zealand, a country that's known for its natural beauty. "Yes, they have beautiful streams and mountains. But, it's so cold. You can't even dip your toes in them. And here, we have such beautiful rivers, but we don't take care of them."

"I went to Gunung Senyum in Pahang. It was magical. When we reached a cave, there was a pool of water inside it. The water there was crystal clear and there were fishes



Canopy view at Hutan Simpan, Sungai Besi.

PICTURES FROM SHARIFFA SABRINA



A stream in Hutan Simpan, Sungai Besi.

in there that I've never seen before. We could have lost this because a developer wanted to blow it up for the quality cement there. Thank God, we were able to stop this from happening.

"When I see the logging and the destruction, it breaks my heart. We have become complacent. We live in comfortable houses. So, we don't want to care about what happens outside those walls. I feel we are doing such a sin to Mother Nature without feeling guilty."

Repeating her invitation for people to participate in the race, she adds: "I am not giving up yet. That's why we chose to have this race at Hutan Simpan. It's the biggest forest in Kuala Lumpur. It's currently gazetted. I don't want what happened to places like Bukit Kiara and Bukit Gasing to happen here—where the land was degazetted and sold to developers. So, I want Malaysians to come and literally put their hands on this land."

Passionately, she concludes: "My agenda is for the rakyat to come and become guardians of Mother Nature."