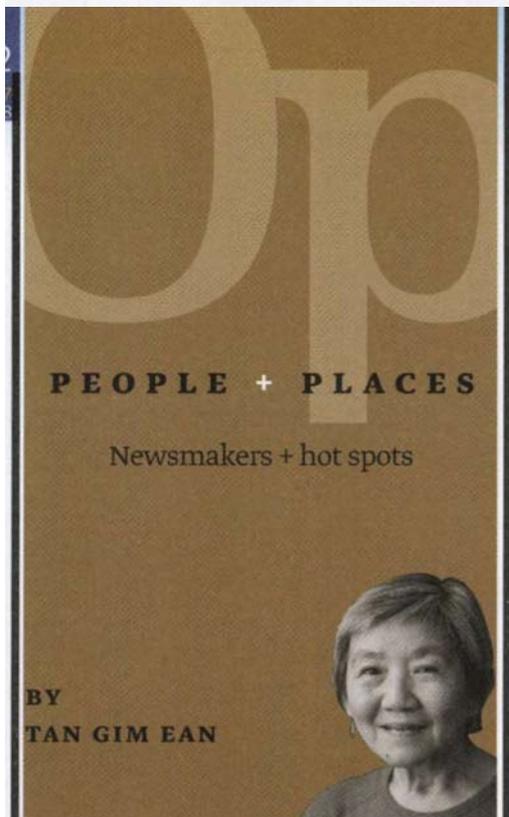


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EVER THE ENVIRONMENTALIST

Closed minds that resist green efforts make Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor see red, but he will not stop speaking up



When Tan Sri Dr Salleh Mohd Nor repeats himself, it is because what he has to say bears repeating. The fact that his words often fall on deaf ears makes him speak louder.

"There have been some successes, but many times, I feel like it's a losing battle," says the green advocate who is as at home talking about his favourite subject under a canopy of trees as on a rostrum.

"In my mind, this is heaven on earth," he adds, eyes sweeping across the towering sentinels around him at the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM).

"While driving to work one day, I offered to give a ride to an Englishman. He said, 'No Salleh, I'll walk. I've always had an impression of what paradise is and I had never felt it until I came here.'"

Salleh's road to the green paradise is paved with research,

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fieldwork, documentation and advocacy, starting with forestry studies in Adelaide on a Colombo Plan scholarship and then in Canberra. He returned to Malaysia in 1965 and undertook forest resources inventory for the Forest Resources Reconnaissance Survey (FRRS), which formed the foundation for national land use planning in the late 1960s.

He then did his MSc and PhD in the US before returning to FRI Kepong, becoming its director in 1977. When FRIM became a statutory body in 1985, he was appointed its first director-general, a position he held until he retired in 1995.

Concurrent with this, he served as president of the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) for 30 years, from 1978.

In 2016, Salleh received the Merdeka Award (Environment) for “outstanding contribution to the conservation of the natural environment and forestry in Malaysia through his leadership role at FRIM and MNS”.

Retirement has not stopped him from worrying about his patch of “heaven on earth” and what is happening to the environment at large. He considers climate change, caused by pollution and greenhouse gases, and loss of biodiversity “silent killers because you don’t see or feel them. And a lot of people don’t care”.

“Politicians can talk, but in the end you have to translate that into actual activities on the ground. The biggest problem in Malaysia is that land is a state matter. Parliament can say a lot, but go to the states and they will tell you, ‘We need money. If we don’t cut the forests, we don’t have revenue’. Is the federal government willing to offset the loss of revenue?”

“I have suggested and written papers on a concept called the debt of nature swap. I think every state government owes the federal government money. The latter can offset the debts if the states agree to conserve substantial areas of virgin natural forest and not to log or harvest them.”

Salleh, who lived on the grounds of FRIM for three decades, sees tree planting as investing in the future. Months spent camping in virgin forests under the FRRS programme opened his eyes to the “beauty, complexity and wonders” of Malaysian forests.

On the flip side, he witnessed rampant destruction of thousand-year-old trees during the heyday of the timber industry and Felda land development schemes. “I saw how human greed had no limits and how corruption led to destruction of the environment. That motivated me to voice the concerns of the people and conservation, and MNS gave me that platform.”

Born in 1940 in Ulu Inas, Negeri Sembilan, he was the typical kampung boy, romping through paddy fields and looking after cows and goats. Hence his endeavours to inculcate an awareness of nature through activities by MNS, which has about 900 student clubs in schools. “My pet project — if anything can be considered that — is to get people to be more aware of nature,” says Salleh, who has a plant named after him. The *Licuala sallehana*, a palm species endemic to Terengganu, is almost extinct.

“The best way to start getting involved in the environment is to join MNS — it’s the same age as me,” he adds. “But it has hardly 3,000 members, which is a shame because the greater the number, the greater our voice. We want more people to join so we can tell the government if it is not doing certain things right.”

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Like the time a plan was mooted to build a road from Kuala Tahan to the Taman Negara National Park in Pahang. "I wrote a long letter to Tun Dr Mahathir (Mohamad, the then prime minister) saying they shouldn't do that because the road would attract poachers." The project was shelved.

When proposals were made to allow logging in the water catchment areas of three reservoirs in Kedah; construct a linear city over Sungai Gombak in Selangor; reclaim mangrove land and build an airport in Pulau Redang, Terengganu; and relocate Zoo Negara in Ampang, Selangor, MNS joined the chorus of those who said "no", and they were heard.

There are times when nay is negative. "We don't have a national botanical gardens....I've been harping on that for years. The Academy of Sciences Malaysia proposed one years ago, but nothing happened. We also proposed a natural history museum, which is still a dream."

There are also the town planners who do not plan for parks but are intent on making money, developers who do not care to build sustainable homes, and enforcement authorities who close their eyes when projects ignore the environmental impact assessment process.

Salleh continues to work in a personal capacity for the environment. As MNS looks towards turning 80 in 2020, he hopes for greater involvement by the public.

"MNS started with one staff and we were parked at (the late director-general of the Museums Department) Datuk Shahrum Yub's Muzium Negara. We had meetings among his skeletons and artefacts. Now we have our own premises and a staff of 30."

He has published various books on conservation, among them *Climate Change and Sustainable Forestry in Malaysia: Research, Development and Policy Issues*; *Marine and Resources of Malaysia* as well as *Antarctica: A New Landmark of the Malaysian Antarctic Research Programme*.

He owns a company that undertakes research on plant biotechnology and production via tissue culture. He is also involved in developing an aquaponics system with funding from Nano-Malaysia Bhd. "I believe a lot of people do not take enough protein. I want to teach people to develop a simple aquaponics system that they can set up in their house, hopefully cheaply or subsidised by the government, to raise fish and vegetables for personal consumption or even to market."

Salleh was one of 50 "Tokoh Malaysia" named on the occasion of the country's golden jubilee. As for the Merdeka Award, he says he was elated to receive the honour. "I was on its first panel of judges for three years. After I retired, they nominated me four times before I won." E

The 2018 Merdeka Award announcement and presentation ceremony will be held on Sept 3 at Four Seasons Hotel Kuala Lumpur. Winners will be chosen in five categories: Education and Community; Environment; Health, Science and Technology; Outstanding Scholastic Achievement; and Outstanding Contribution to the People of Malaysia.

The Merdeka Award was founded by Petronas, ExxonMobil and Shell in August 2007 to recognise and reward individuals and organisations that have contributed to the nation's growth and inspired Malaysians in their respective fields.

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