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To Nature's rescue

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Malaysians from various walks of life share their ideas on saving the world.

WHAT would you do if you were in the seat of power, with clout to influence the state of our environment? What would you do if *you* were the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment? We posed this question to Malaysians and here are their replies:

“If I were the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, I would ...”

“... walk more and follow our drains (or should I say rivers). There is nothing like being close to the ground to understand what needs to be done. I would also increase the price of fossil fuels and tax all petroleum-based industries (which includes plastics). This tax would be channelled to a special fund to support environment programmes nationwide.”
– **Dr Reza Azmi, conservation planner and founder of Wild Asia**



The Tanjung Piai park in Johor shelters a lush mangrove forest. We need more such protected areas. –Pic by CHOU K.S.

“... take the lead role to ensure basic environmental knowledge is passed on to every child. Children must be taught basic things such as the three Rs so that it becomes second nature to them. Schools must be made environmentally-friendly. They can be places where children will learn to love our planet and be responsible for it. It is at this age that they will love animals and want to protect them. I would work with the Education Minister to develop learning tools and project-based activities to keep children interested in what this planet offers us, what are its threats and how each individual, young or old, can play a role in keeping it healthy. There would be loads more that can be done.” – **Lara Ariffin, producer**

“... pass the death penalty for people who poach the Sumatran rhinoceros and Malayan tiger, ensure that no more forest is converted into urban areas or agricultural land, fight for more budget to improve the environment and safeguard it from further deterioration.” – **Julia Ng, programme officer, Traffic South-East Asia**

“... enforce rigorously the many laws which are in place, to make a difference. A trinity of anti-pollution laws combined with environmental education and strict enforcement, will ensure that society appreciates and upkeeps a pristine environment. These laws need to control hill-cutting, illegal logging, waste dumping and throwing of plastic bags out of car windows. They must also reward recycling and reuse as efficient means to avoid energy wastage which contributes to global warming. Only when the last tree is dead will we realise that money cannot be eaten.” – **Dr Richard Cropp, chemical engineer**

“... I’d first and foremost send my entire staff for training on basic compassion for animals. I’d fly down experts from Animals Asia Foundation (AAF), who are respected worldwide for their outstanding work in animal rescue and education, to train all my staff on the ethical treatment of animals. And, it can’t hurt for municipal council officers to attend these classes too. I’d also protect our wildlife in our rainforest, not in zoos and tourists resorts where wildlife like the orang utan is made to cycle and perform kick-boxing. You cannot create a society mature enough to recycle and use less plastic unless you deal with their hearts first. And a healthy heart comes firstly from treating those who are helpless, like this country’s animals, with care and respect.” – **Shoba Mano, animal rights activist**



To enjoy swimming among fishes in the sea, we must stem all marine pollution. –Pic by ANTHONY TAN / The Star

"... I'd start a year-long 'Community for Clean Air and Clean Water' campaign whereby each community, neighbourhood, village, school or Felda scheme is given cash to commit to one thing to ensure clean air and/or clean water – complete with measurable outcomes. On top of that, the community which best achieves its goals will win a prize and be used as a model to be replicated elsewhere." – **Wong Siew Lyn, writer**

"... push for Environmental Education to be an official part of the school curriculum – if not as a subject by itself, then as a module or section of the Science subject. It's good to start them young. I would also keep an eye on existing green lungs and parks to make sure they don't get bulldozed for development, and try to set up new ones, where possible. I would also review the Environmental Impact Assessment procedures to raise the bar to make sure EIA consultants are doing a proper job and developers do not start work on a project before the EIA has been officially approved. All stakeholders and other relevant parties should be notified of a project development and invited to comment on the EIA report." – **Khor Hui Min, copywriter**

"... commute by bus, train and LRT once a week, to see how bad the public transportation is and how it can be improved. I would also encourage other agencies to create more car-free zones in the city and build more cycling lanes. Not only will this lessen traffic congestion, it will lead to cleaner air and less global warming." – **Dennis Quah, college student**

“... provide justifications to the Economic Planning Unit, Public Services Department and Treasury to provide more staff and resources to the Conservation and Environmental Management Division. This is the main agency co-ordinating biodiversity conservation but it has only a handful of officers. Although water and air quality are important matters and deserve attention, biodiversity conservation is a much-neglected area.

“There are overlaps between the functions of the Forestry Department, and the Wildlife and National Parks Department (Perhilitan). Forestry staff mainly enforce laws against illegal logging and pay little attention to poaching of wildlife and non-timber plants. Officers from both departments patrol the forest for different purposes. Therefore, resources are not optimised. I would instruct them to conduct joint patrols but, ultimately, I would merge the two, as is done in Sarawak.

“I would also work with the Housing and Local Government Ministry to ensure that every local council has environment and biodiversity officers. This will ensure that environmental considerations are integrated into planning and management at the local level, in the hope that projects that are detrimental to the environment are rejected early on. I would also meet the Menteri Besar and Chief Minister of every state so that Perhilitan is included in state planning committees. So far, it is usually not consulted when projects are discussed but is blamed when human-wildlife conflict occurs.” – **Surin Suksuwan, conservationist**

“... make flash floods a thing of the past. I would ensure that the Drainage and Irrigation Department enforces laws on stormwater management in urban areas, development sites and cleared lands. Very often, it is the water runoffs from these places that silt up our rivers and make them shallow, thus causing flash floods.” – **Colin Dass, lawyer**

“... make financial institutions play a bigger role in environmental conservation, and not just in terms of supporting green campaigns or wildlife research. Conservation concerns should be integrated into how banks operate. For instance, banks should scrutinise the environmental risks and liabilities, as well as social impact, of development projects before financing such schemes.” – **Ridwan Mohamad, surveyor**



Even as we organise tree-planting campaigns, we are clearing more forests. – Pic by MUSTAFA AHMAD / The Star

“... amend the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 urgently, to embrace current needs, in light of the levels and sophistication of crimes against wildlife. It has been 35 years since this Act came into force, and amendments are long overdue. Wildlife criminals escape with minute fines compared to the contraband value of the wildlife they profit from. I would push for a new Act to address the need for greater penalties, including mandatory imprisonment, and to seal existing loopholes. It should no longer be possible for wildlife criminals to escape prosecution and punishment because of a legal inadequacy. And I would ensure that the new Act is enforced on the ground, and stretches to actual wildlife protection beyond mere paper protection.” – **Loretta Ann Soosayraj, co-ordinator, Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers**

“... create a comprehensive and representative protected area system for the country, by requiring all states to set aside protected areas under a single system that enables on-the-ground management, and supported by the required expertise and funding. To achieve this goal, the ministry needs to firmly place the environmental agenda within the portfolio of every public sector agency. I would put a paper to cabinet to, once and for all, set up this protected area system through a single inter-agency umbrella body, possibly under the ministry itself. I would then commit resources to making this happen within five years.” – **Anthony Sebastian, president, Malaysian Nature Society**

“... ensure that the ministry lives up to its role as custodian of the environment. I would apply my Five Action Plans to make the ministry more effective, responsible and accountable. First, I would review the institutional set-up of the ministry to determine the responsibilities of various departments, and decide whether solid waste management comes under my purview or that of the Housing and Local Government Minister.

Second, I would review the capabilities of my staff and give them training, to ensure that they are competent.

Third, I would set up a technical advisory working group of my officers, specialists, academicians and professionals, to guide the ministry. We would meet regularly to foster greater public-private consultation. I would formulate policies only after consultation with them. It would be premature for me to implement ad-hoc policies and actions that could be counter-productive. Take for instance, the call by many to ban plastic bags. To me, it is the disposal of plastic bags that is damaging the environment, not the bags themselves. If citizens dispose of the bags carefully and insist on better landfill management to recover and recycle the bags, then perhaps we would not have a problem.

Fourth, I would set up an information centre to document all environmental problems and issues, so that we can learn from past mistakes. It will also be a resource centre for the public to enhance their environmental knowledge.

Fifth, I would set up an Environmental Crime Scene Investigation Department. Many environmental problems would be avoidable if detected early. It is the lack of diligence and monitoring that usually leads to environmental disasters.” – **Ng Han Kok, mechanical engineer**