

DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM NATURE

Nature is a great source of inspiration for a fresh perspective, from the greenery as well as the abundant fauna.

Text: Khior Hui Min & Rachel Wong | Images: Courtesy of iStockphoto

Nature is our home and it is where our ancestors hunted and gathered their food. In simpler times, when there were not as many distractions as they are today, people lived closed to nature and frequently found inspiration for creative ideas and solace in times of distress.

With development and technological advances, people are moving further and further away from nature, cut off from greenery except for a potted plants on their balconies and in their offices, and of course, the nice view of forests far away, for which they paid a premium price for.



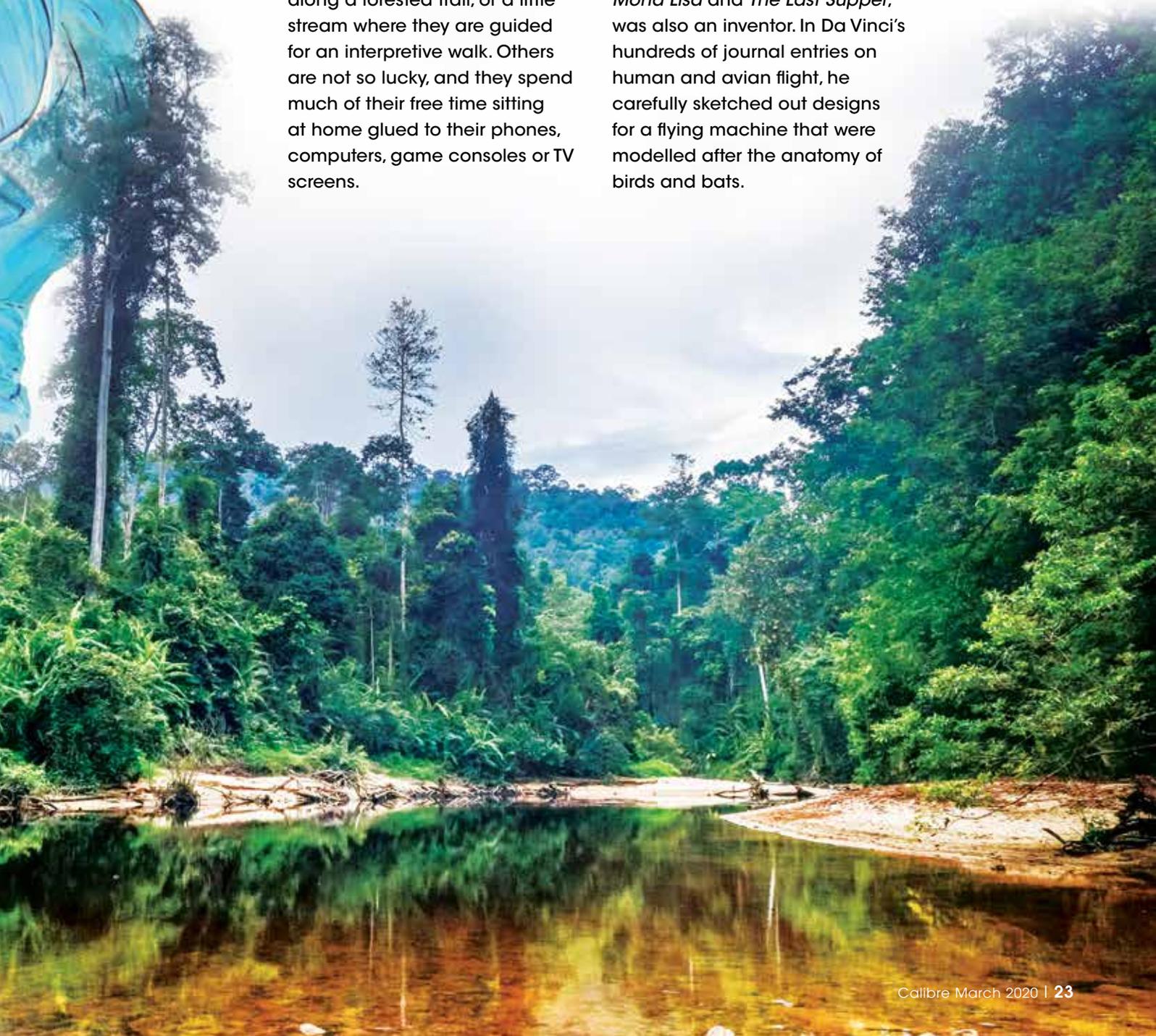
Living in the concrete jungles of cities has isolated humans from what was once their home.

The 'disconnectedness' can be quite obvious among young children, some of whom have never seen a live chicken or duck running around freely. To some of them, nature would be the trees they see when they go for a school outing, hiking along a forested trail, or a little stream where they are guided for an interpretive walk. Others are not so lucky, and they spend much of their free time sitting at home glued to their phones, computers, game consoles or TV screens.

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

Humans have always gained inspiration from nature. For example, many prehistoric cave drawings depicted animals. Through the ages, countless artists have painted marvellous scenes of nature, from which they drew their inspiration.

The celebrated Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci, who painted famous artworks such as *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper*, was also an inventor. In Da Vinci's hundreds of journal entries on human and avian flight, he carefully sketched out designs for a flying machine that were modelled after the anatomy of birds and bats.



Humans have five senses—sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. The stimuli from nature can activate our senses in myriad ways, and we interpret them differently because of our knowledge and life experiences. How we filter and understand what we experience and how they make us feel can lead to all kinds of ideas and ‘eureka’ moments.

“Mother Nature is filled with amazing things to teach us, but a good student can only be taught with what they are open to discovering. It is an open university with no cemented walls and learning is free. The learning and teaching of new lessons are endless,” says Vincent Chow, vice president of the Malaysian Nature Society.

“We all approach Nature from our perspective, based on our basic knowledge and interest. Nature will teach you different things depending on your interest and goals. Undeniably, one can learn to think more clearly while seeking to unravel all the mysteries and complexities about nature. Some will also swear that their sense of spiritual connection is enhanced especially when they are surrounded by the endless wonders of nature,” he adds.

WHY IS SAVING NATURE IMPORTANT?

Although many people do not appreciate our dependence on nature, it is an undeniable fact that we live on earth surrounded by nature. Even though many now live in air-conditioned comfort in their high-rise buildings, far

removed from forests and rivers, we still need to breathe air and drink water. Air and water come from nature, and thus, polluted air and water will make us sick. Trees give us oxygen, and if we keep cutting down trees, the percentage of oxygen in the atmosphere will be negatively affected. Tropical rainforests are usually referred to as the lungs of the planet. They help to create and maintain equilibrium in ecosystems and stabilise the climate, rainfall, temperature and humidity. Unfortunately, the polluting activities caused by humans are adding carbon dioxide and other polluting gases to the mix, thereby worsening the situation.

“According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (UN FAO), in 2011, 62.3 per cent or about 20,456,000 ha of Malaysia was still forested. Of that, 18.7 per cent or about 3,820,000 ha was primary forest, while 1,807,000 ha was planted forest. As one of the top 12th megabiodiverse countries in the world, Malaysia must keep enough natural forests for wildlife and other fauna such as insects and fishes, to maintain equilibrium,” says Prof Dr Ahmad Ismail, president of the Malaysian Nature Society.

“Stable forests can maintain good water cycles, supplying us with the water we need for our survival and wellbeing, as well as protect us from flood, drought, and erosion. The forests provide other services such as medicinal sources, agricultural sources, food, ecotourism and homes for



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local tribes," he adds.

"Our tropical rainforest in Malaysia, also known as the Old World rainforest, is where much of the global biodiversity is located. Tropical rainforests are home to 80 per cent of the world's terrestrial biodiversity, all squeezed into a narrow strip of equatorial land. This is also true for our marine environment. Not many would realise it, but we also have the richest coral diversity, also known as the tropical rainforest of the sea, in the world," explains Balu Perumal, who is head of the Conservation Unit of the Malaysian Nature Society.

"The National Biodiversity Index ranked Malaysia 12th in the

world in terms of biodiversity, based on estimates of country richness and endemism in four terrestrial vertebrate classes and vascular plants. Endowed with over 15,000 species of flowering plants, 1,500 species of terrestrial vertebrates and about 150,000 species of invertebrates, this biodiverse richness is relatively unknown to the average Malaysian," explains Vincent.

"We are home to the world's largest Dragonfly (*Tetracanthgyna plagiata*) by wingspan and the female is the heaviest of all dragonflies. In the plant kingdom, the Tiger Orchid produces the largest wild orchid bloom at 10cm wide and Ridley (1924) had



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reported that the whole plant weighs about 2 tons and can bear up to 7000 flowers. When considered at the species level, Malaysia has 110 species of bats, more than 3,000 species of wild orchids, about 220 species of mammals, 165 species of frogs and toads, 622 species of freshwater fishes, 1,165 species of ferns, 740 species of forest and island birds and the list goes on,” Vincent elaborates.

“People ask me why should we conserve freshwater turtles, i.e. what do they do for us? They ask this question because they don’t ‘see it’, because this isn’t something you see daily, especially if you’re working in a city. When I tell them that terrapins are threatened by sand mining operations, i.e. sand used in the construction of roads and buildings are mined from riverbanks, it gives them something to think about. When I tell people that female river terrapins lay an average of 25 eggs in a year, compared to an average of 1,000 per female sea turtle, they go, ‘Oh, wow, talk about species extinction’,” says Dr Chen Pelf Nyok, co-founder of Turtle Conservation Society of Malaysia.

“Protecting Malaysia’s rich biodiversity is our responsibility. It is a wealth that we have been endowed with and a treasure that we inherited—our birth right really! Imagine what we can do with it for prosperity if we only manage it well enough. We could generate income for eternity,” says Balu.

With eco-tourism gaining

RIVER CARE PROGRAMMES

Rivers play an important role in our lives. We all need fresh drinking water to survive and people depend on rivers for their livelihoods. Rivers are also home to some of the world’s most diverse and endangered wildlife. Unfortunately, many of us have forgotten about the importance of rivers and this has led to serious degradation in our rivers today.

In Malaysia, 5 per cent of our river basins are severely polluted and 42 per cent are polluted, leaving only 53 per cent of all rivers classified as ‘clean’.

The lack of education and awareness of the general public about our water resources, how they are being managed, and how they should be managed is a key factor that has led to the current state of Malaysia’s overall water quality. Another important factor is the lack of skills of people who are genuinely interested in participating in river management.

To address these issues, a pioneer and leading NGO on community-based river care in Malaysia, the Global Environment Centre (GEC), has come up with initiatives that provide a better understanding about the importance of our rivers and

SAVING THE RIVERS

Find out how these initiatives are restoring the rivers in Malaysia and beyond.

appreciate the value of them. GEC's River Care Programmes aim to promote community participation in its mission to promote the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of rivers.

One of its projects, the W.A.T.E.R Project was created to sustain water resources through 'water balancing'. The concept of 'water balancing' encourages industries to maximise water efficiency, manage wastewater discharge, and be knowledgeable about water conservation. Another project, the River of Life strives to transform the eight rivers that are located within the Greater KL/ Klang Valley region through river cleaning, river beautification and tourism.

If you are interested to get involved in GEC's river care and water conservation projects, visit www.gec.org.my for more information.

CAUVERY CALLING

In July 2019, Indian yogi and founder of the non-profit organisation Isha Foundation, Jaggi Vasudev, also known as

Sadhguru, started an initiative to save one of India's largest rivers—the Cauvery.

The Cauvery is the third largest river in South India and flows through two states, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. In fact, the river basin covers three states and one Union Territory namely, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, and Puducherry.

Historically, it has supported irrigated agriculture for centuries. It's been the lifeblood of millions of people for many years but the once mighty river has been depleted by over 40 per cent in the last 70 years. And the river continues to diminish in size.

The Cauvery Calling initiative created by Sadhguru calls for the public and India's government to revitalise the river through agroforestry.

You might think that trees consume water and indeed, they do, but their roots also help keep the soil porous, allowing the rivers to draw moisture from deep within the soil during dry seasons.

As trees are replaced by

concrete jungles and inefficient agricultural practices continue, the soil is insufficiently nourished. 87 per cent of the basin's original tree cover has been lost, diminishing the land's ability to feed the Cauvery.

To rescue the river, the initiative will support farmers across Karnataka and Tamil Nadu to plant 2.42 billion trees. In government land, native species can be planted. In private land, farmers can plant fruit and timber trees alongside their crops.

Through a month-long farmer outreach programme which started on 31 July 2019, the foundation has reached 0.27 million farmers in over 6,500 villages in the land surrounding the Cauvery basin.

You can help plant a tree, start a campaign to create awareness, or volunteer. If you would like to contribute, visit www.ishaoutreach.org for more information.

COVER STORY

popularity year after year, and the increasing trend of tourists seeking experiences rather than shopping, Malaysia has a lot to offer and much potential to grow in the ecotourism sector.

CO-EXISTING HARMONIOUSLY WITH ANIMALS AND PLANTS

As you can see, there are many reasons to preserve our natural heritage for posterity. Besides the important ecological functions it provides, nature provides opportunities for economic growth. Therefore, we have good reasons to co-exist with nature in harmony.



Dr Chen Pelf Nyok,
Founder, Turtle
Conservation Society
of Malaysia

“There is a proverb that says ‘Don’t kill a golden goose’. If you follow this advice, you will be naturally inclined to co-exist and/or co-live with the plants and animals that make up our rich tropical biodiversity, no matter how easy or difficult it can be. So, let’s start by learning more about the tropical rainforest and its associated biodiversity,” says Balu.

“If you have read history, you may recall that the great Greek philosopher Ptolemy was first to create the world map, and in it he identified our country as the ‘Golden Chersonese’, which means ‘the land of gold’. Here, we have the treasure (that is the envy of the world) and we should all take things seriously and conserve it today,” he adds.

“I tell the local villagers that for as long as the river terrapins are found (and thriving) in the Kemaman River, we will have guests—local and international tourists who visit our Turtle Gallery and project site. The local villagers will continue catering meals. Local women can continue sewing terrapin-print batiks for sale. The community will continue to benefit from the presence of the terrapins. And



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the general public could benefit too, including children who visit us and join our educational programmes. If the terrapins become extinct, all that is left would be a gallery, some newspaper articles, and photos. That will not give tourists a reason to visit us. They could do a search and find other more exciting conservation programmes to support,” says Dr Chen.

LET’S DO OUR PART

Nature is undoubtedly important. It gives us a place to live, clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and food to eat. It also provides us with potential income in the form of ecotourism and its various connected services. Let’s do our part today to conserve and protect our home, our source of food and artistic and creative inspiration. ☺