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INSPIRING NATURALISTS

Nature as seen through the observations of the world's greatest naturalists

IN HARMONY WITH NATURE

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Weird & Wonderful

SIX WOMEN TALK ABOUT THEIR UNUSUAL HOBBIES

Taking the Lead Against WILDLIFE EXTINCTION

MEET THREE LOCAL
CONSERVATIONISTS SAVING
ENDANGERED ANIMALS

WAYS TO
CLEAN
YOUR
HOME
NATURALLY



MARCH 2022



We have a huge task ahead of us to save our planet's biodiversity, as climate change takes an unprecedented toll on the natural world and scientists warn of a "sixth mass extinction." But some of that work has already begun, and what better time to celebrate it than to read inspiring conservation stories that prove what's possible when we put in time, effort, and energy into helping Mother Earth.

CONSERVING THE SUN BEAR

Only found in Southeast Asia, the Malayan sun bears are the smallest bears in the world. They are threatened by habitat loss from forest degradation, and illegal hunting for bear parts. Because they look so cute, the cubs are poached and sold in the pet trade.

"Unbeknownst to the buyers of the cute little bears, the poachers have to kill the mother bear to take the baby bear away from

her. So, please do not buy sun bear cubs or any other babies of wild animals to be your pets," explains Dr Wong Siew Te, who has loved animals since young.

With a background in animal science and veterinary, Dr Wong was a pioneer in the study of the ecology of the Malayan sun bear, beginning in 1998 in Danum Valley, Sabah. At that time, nobody knew anything about the bears. He realised that they were important and amazing creatures.

CONSERVATION

Meet three amazing wildlife conservationists who are working to protect special species in Malaysia. *Calibre* catches up with them to learn about the incredible animals they're working to save, and just how they're doing it.

Text: Khor Hui Min | Images: Courtesy of Respective Interviewees / Stockphoto

Dr Wong founded the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre (BSBCC), which opened its doors to the public in 2014. It is a sun bear rescue and rehabilitation facility located in Sandakan, Sabah.

"During my nationwide survey of captive sun bears in 2004, I got the idea to set up a centre to rescue the caged sun bears, which were housed in small, cramped cages in dirty conditions. The Malayan

Dr Wong with a sun bear.



To find out more about the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre and how you can help, visit www.bsbcc.org.my



Dr Wong Siew Te,
CEO and Founder of
Bornean Sun Bear
Conservation Centre

IN MOTION

sun bear is a protected species, but due to lack of enforcement, they end up in their unfortunate conditions," says Dr Wong.

"I volunteered to set up the centre to conserve the sun bears, because we just cannot afford to lose them. We work closely with the Sabah Wildlife Department, and they keep the rescued bears here. We also have a veterinarian clinic here. Our location is strategic, as we are next to the orangutan centre," he adds.

The centre has 28 dedicated full-time staff who take care of 43 rescued ex-captive sun bears and one captive born bear residing there and assist in running the centre.

The facility provides a natural environment suited to the needs and welfare of the sun bears,

with large forest enclosures. They undergo a rehabilitation process to prepare them to be released back into the wild.

The five pillars of BSBCC are animal welfare, rehabilitation, research, education, and ecotourism.

"It is a model centre for conservation work and serves to inspire the younger conservationists as well. Visitors can visit the centre to learn about sun bears and observe them in their natural habitat. Ticket sales contribute towards the upkeep and running of the centre," says Dr Wong.

"BSBCC has been around for 14 years, and we are still here because of your support. You can help our centre by volunteering with us, fundraising for the bears, visiting our centre, adopting a

"Unbeknownst to the buyers of the cute little bears, the poachers have to kill the mother bear to take the baby bear away from her. So, please do not buy sun bear cubs or any other babies of wild animals to be your pets."

– Dr Wong Siew Te

bear, giving donations, and buying our merchandise," he adds.

In the pipeline are an anti-poaching project, community conservation, forest connectivity project, and captive breeding project. Apart from planning for the sustainability of the centre, Dr Wong is also heading the Sabah sun bear action plan.

CHAMPIONING CETACEANS

Dr Louisa Ponnampalan always wanted to be a marine biologist. In fact, she was obsessed with dolphins since she was a teenager.

"It was not easy to get information on dolphins back then because there was no Google yet. In the 1990s, I had a scrapbook to keep newspaper articles on nature and environmental news. I remembered reading sad news about turtles eating plastic bags and whales getting entangled in nets. I wanted to do something about it," says Dr Louisa.

"I decided at age 13 that I wanted to be a dolphin researcher. I wanted to study overseas and come back to Malaysia to study the marine

mammals and dolphins here. That was how I wanted to contribute to marine conservation as an individual. I didn't want a desk job. I wanted to be out in the field and interacting with wildlife," she shares.

By Form Five, she was trying to get referral letters from teachers to study at a university in Hawaii. She was driven by her passion and there was no Plan B. She had made up her mind.

After her studies, she came back and conducted research in Malaysia, but she wanted to do more than that. She wanted to make the information accessible to the public.

"Many people didn't understand what cetaceans were. They are marine mammals

consisting of whales, dolphins and porpoises. Some people thought they were fish, while others thought they only lived in cold climates," says Dr Louisa.

In 2012, Dr Louisa set up MareCet with Fairul Izmal Jamal Hisne. It is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Malaysia and dedicated to the conservation of marine mammals and their research.

The name MareCet is pronounced as "ma-rei-set". It is



Dr Louisa Ponnampalan, Co-founder and Executive Director of MareCet

"In general, there is lack of data on the dolphin population across the country. To detect dolphin population trends, we need a large amount of data."

– Dr Louisa Ponnampalan



a combination of two words— Mare and Cetacean. “Mare” is a Latin word that means ocean, while “Cetaceans” are marine mammals.

Now 10 years old, MareCet is a platform for young Malaysians to volunteer and dabble in marine conservation work. Some volunteers had become staff members and 50 per cent of volunteers enter the environmental or marine-related fields. MareCet also aims to raise the profile of marine mammals in Malaysia.

“In general, there is lack of data across the country. MareCet conducts research on dolphins in the waters off Langkawi (Kedah) and Matang (Perak), and dugong off the coast of Johor. But nobody is covering the entire coastline. To detect population trends, we need a large amount of data,” says Dr Louisa.

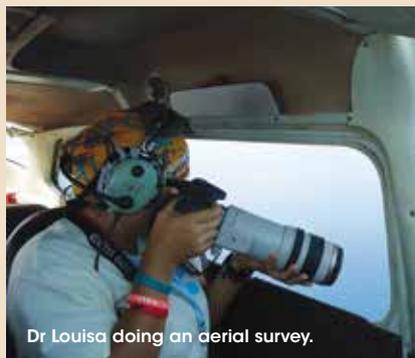
“Based on our work, dolphins and porpoises are doing all right. They are found all along the coastline and have stable populations. Every year, we see many calves. We also continue to see dolphins that we first saw 10 years ago. However, sometimes they wash up dead on beaches and we need to find out their cause of death,” she adds.

“On the other hand, there is a small population of dugongs off the east coast of Johor, consisting of around 20 dugongs. Here, dugongs are critically endangered, so we can’t afford to have human induced mortality. Every animal is important to the population’s survival,” says Dr Louisa.

Dr Louisa advises people that



Dr Louisa at work.



Dr Louisa doing an aerial survey.

they can help to take care of the marine environment by watching their daily lifestyle and habits. They need to be more mindful in purchasing and using products, such as minimising or getting rid of single-use plastics. There are no facilities to recycle them and a lot of them end up in rivers and the sea.

“I’ve literally seen dolphins swimming through trash, which was washed out from rivers and drains. The waste management systems in rural areas and at island areas are not so good,” she says.

“You can also reduce the pressure on the sea by consuming less seafood, as the seafood in

Malaysia is being depleted at an alarming rate,” she adds.

It would be great if people could support marine conservation efforts and offer their skills and expertise to help NGOs. For example, someone with software or IT skills can help create an app for people to report cetacean sightings, beaching or carcasses washed up on beaches, suggests Dr Louisa.

In the pipeline, Dr Louisa is hopeful the Johor Dugong Sanctuary will become a reality. It was proposed by the Johor state government in 2016, but is still pending to date.

She also hopes that environmental conservation, including marine conservation, will be included in the education syllabus, become part of mainstream education, and be taught in schools.

To find out more about MareCet and how you can help, visit www.marecet.org

COVER STORY

PROTECTING THE RIVER TERRAPINS

Dr Chen Pelf Nyok was obsessed with turtles since she was a child. While living in Ipoh, she would tell her mother that she wanted to go to the temple to see the turtles on the way home, and her mother would bring her to see her favourite animal.

She ended up studying marine biology in Terengganu and co-founded the Turtle Conservation Society of Malaysia (TCS) in 2011 with Prof Dr Chan Eng Heng.

"We realised that there wasn't an organisation or agency in charge of the tortoises and freshwater turtles in Malaysia, despite being home to 18 species of native species," says Dr Chen.

TCS is the first non-governmental and non-profit organisation dedicated to the conservation of freshwater turtles in Malaysia. The Society focuses on the study and recovery of the depleted wild populations

of river terrapins. The river terrapin is a unique species of freshwater turtle found only in Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia.

TCS started the Kemaman River Terrapin Conservation Project in 2011. It is a river terrapin nesting and tagging study that is still ongoing. To date, this community-based conservation project has saved more than 6,400 terrapin eggs from being eaten and released almost 4,000 head-started terrapins into the Kemaman River.

Dr Chen hopes to realise the goals of TCS through partnerships with like-minded organisations, individuals, and local communities as well as through its own programmes.

"We work closely with PERHILITAN, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks. The river terrapin is a protected species. They have granted TCS a special license to do our work

Dr Chen Pelf Nyok,
Executive Director of
Turtle Conservation
Society of Malaysia

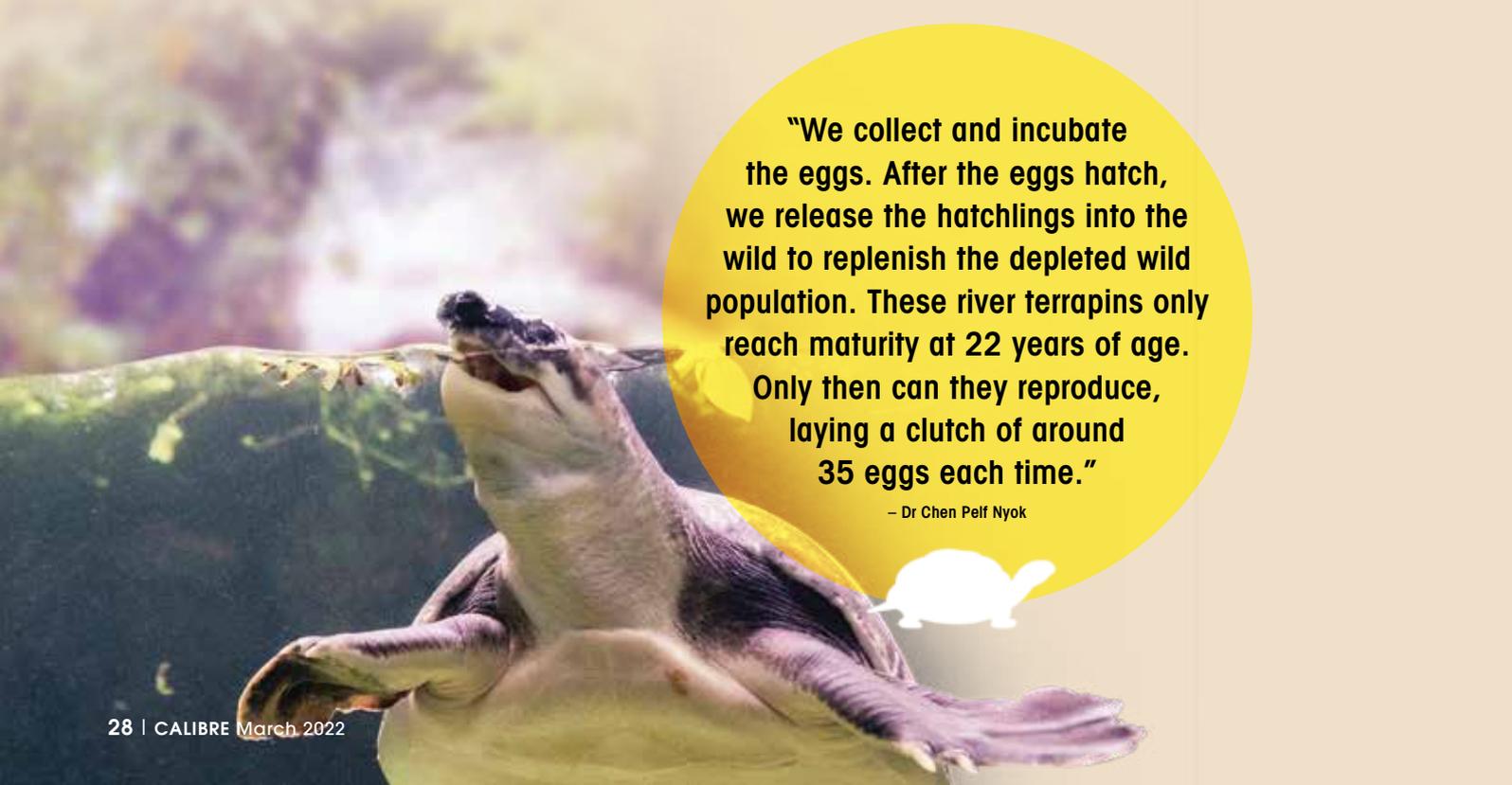


with the river terrapins. Every year, I prepare a report and submit it to them, then they renew our license," says Dr Chen.

"We collect and incubate the eggs. After the eggs hatch, we release the hatchlings into the wild to replenish the depleted wild population. These river

"We collect and incubate the eggs. After the eggs hatch, we release the hatchlings into the wild to replenish the depleted wild population. These river terrapins only reach maturity at 22 years of age. Only then can they reproduce, laying a clutch of around 35 eggs each time."

— Dr Chen Pelf Nyok



terrapins only reach maturity at 22 years of age. Only then can they reproduce, laying a clutch of around 35 eggs each time. However, there is an age-old tradition of consuming the eggs in the local villages, which still continues until today. The consumption of these eggs has not been banned. Besides that, sand mining has also degraded their habitat," she adds.

Dr Chen hopes that people will have an interest in the protection and conservation of these river terrapins, so that their population

can be maintained at a healthy level.

The public can support the society by attending virtual tours during the pandemic, buy their merchandise, adopt a terrapin, and give donations.

In the pipeline, Dr Chen is working on developing a River Terrapin Conservation Strategy for use at the locations where the terrapins are found, namely in Kemaman in Terengganu, Bukit Pinang in Kedah, Bota Kanan in Perak, and Kuala Berang in Terengganu.

To find out more about TCS and how you can help, visit www.turtleconservationsociety.org.my

Earth has many inhabitants and there is so much that we still do not know about the fauna and flora that we share this planet with. It is time to take our role as caretakers and guardians of the planet seriously and work together with conservationists to ensure that more of our precious plants and animals do not go extinct. ☺

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO CONSERVE ENDANGERED SPECIES



What can you do to protect threatened and endangered species? Here are some of the ways:

Help
end illegal
species trade.

Volunteer
with endangered
species conservation
organisations.

Report
harassment and cruelty
towards animals.

Be compassionate
and don't participate in activities
that exploit threatened or
endangered species, for example,
hunting of wild animals as trophies,
and buying products made from
endangered animals.

Reduce
your carbon footprint
and advocate for
climate change
education and carbon
reduction policies.

Protect
ecosystems and
habitat; support laws
creating open space,
wildlife crossings, and
corridors and other
protections.