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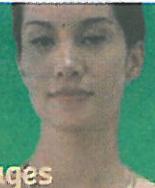


Business for the Environment  
Global Summit 2011



27 - 29 April 2011, Shangri-La Hotel, Jakarta, Indonesia

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# Student Globe

THE SECOND OF THREE SPECIAL JakartaGlobe SUPPLEMENTS

Almost a billion people switched off for Earth Hour. But is it enough? Find out inside ...

# Saving the world in **sixty** minutes

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**G**rowing up in tropical Southeast Asia it is easy to take our surroundings for granted. With constant warm temperatures and lots of sunshine throughout a year punctuated by tropical thunderstorms and occasional monsoons, this is the climate that we are familiar with. It may not be as picturesque as temperate regions, but those same qualities make tropical environments among the richest on Earth for biodiversity.

While we complain about inconvenient thunderstorms and scorching afternoons, these conditions support our precious tropical rainforests. These forests in turn host a range of environments that let thousands of species co-exist. The sheer number of life forms living together at such high densities is unheard-of in any other habitat type. To find a level of biodiversity to compare, we'd probably have to go to Latin America or the Congo Basin in Africa, two more examples of tropical rainforest systems.

We have probably all seen documentaries on the awe-inspiring Amazon rainforests and the wonderful animals that live there. We are familiar with brilliant footage of animals in the African savannahs — prides of lions, herds of African elephants and stunningly large migrations. So why do we seldom see that same level of admiration for the rainforests that we are blessed with in our own backyards? Are our Southeast Asian rainforests really any less fascinating?

#### The Sun Bear

Although the Bali and Javan tigers of Indonesia are now extinct, Malaysia and Indonesia still play host to the Malayan and Sumatran tigers. The lesser-known clouded leopards also lurk elusively in the forests. People from all over the world say the name orang utan without even realizing they have just spoken the Indonesian language. We have unique species of elephants and rhinoceroses living deep in the forests of Thailand and Borneo. Many of us are not even aware that we share our region with a species of bear, which is why the sun bear was unfortunately labelled the "forgotten bear of Southeast Asia" by Malaysian researcher Dr. Wong Siew Te. These are only the more charismatic species. The list could go on.

Could it be that the media has influenced how we appreciate our environment? Does it take popular movies like *The Lion King* and *The Jungle Book* to make our youth think? Are HD documentaries responsible for the disproportionate amount of interest in our natural world? These representations of nature, whether



## All That Glitters Is Not Necessarily Green ...

Palm oil: Does it cause more problems than it solves?

fictitious or factual, are a kind of education and exposure.

I believe popular culture has played a part. It has the potential to distract us from the beauty that exists right in front of our very eyes. I remember part of a script from a Night Safari Singapore presentation that goes, "They have come from the mystical lands of the hornbills," referring to the rainforests of Borneo. Well, Southeast Asia's rainforests do not need to be mystical anymore. With the correct recognition and education, they can be as fascinating and amazing as the Amazon rainforests.

#### Danger: Falling Trees

Although our appreciation for our own region is increasing, our precious rainforests are being destroyed at a startling rate. Indonesia and the Congo Basin together account for 20 percent of the world's rainforests. Yet in the last 20 years Indonesia has lost rainforests equivalent to the land area of the whole of the United Kingdom. In the five minutes it takes you to read this article, an average of 14 hectares of rainforest will have been cut down for timber and for conversion to plantations.

The direct effects of the deforestation of primary forests are easy to understand. Unique habitats and their animals vanish. But it is the indirect and long-term effects that are particularly worrying.

Each year, Southeast Asia puts up with haze in the atmosphere

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caused by fires lit to clear land. This haze affects not just the immediate health of humans and animals alike, but it also has a long-term effect on forest productivity. Plantations require reliable transportation networks and large amounts of fertilizers. This has an even bigger impact on the small pockets of forest that have been spared from chainsaws. Behind all this destruction, a particular industry is especially responsible.



The sun bear: A forgotten friend?

#### Palm Oil: Solution or Problem?

The oil palm is not a plant native to Southeast Asia, yet the palm-oil industry has single-handedly converted thousands of hectares of primary rainforest into oil palm monocultures. These plantations are a very profitable form of agriculture because the oil palm fruit and kernel have many different uses: they provide cooking oil, ingredients for products like soap, and a potential form of biofuel.

Inevitably the market will be attractive for Southeast Asian business people. Almost solely represented by Malaysia and Indonesia, the region is the world's dominant exporter of palm oil, and the sector contributes a significant amount to both countries' GDPs.

In today's world, we struggle to satisfy our insatiable need for energy. Political leaders have gone to great lengths to source alternative fuels to relieve reliance on fossil fuels. Alberta, Canada currently has its share of controversy as fresh water sources are threatened by the extraction of oil from the tar sands, while the US has been cautiously exploring the

use of corn oil as bio-fuel. Bio-fuel is still a controversial solution to the global strain on fossil fuels. Research has shown the amount of carbon released by cultivating bio-fuel is sometimes more than would be released if we just stuck to using fossil fuels. With agricultural land now not completely dedicated to food crops, this may have implications for global food prices too.

Ninety per cent of my extended family are in Malaysia, and I fondly remember the long drives along Malaysia's north-south highway and being fascinated as a child by the endless expanse of land out in the distance, in stark contrast to my native Singapore, a land-scarce country. I noticed how identical all the trees looked for almost the entire 250km. I was informed by my father that those were oil palms, a very useful plant to us. Back then, with my limited primary school science, trees were good things to have. I felt that it was good to have so much greenery constantly cleaning our air while providing us with food and money. If only things were that simple.

The world needs timber and palm oil, but it expects our region to act more responsibly. I believe a sustainable compromise can be struck. Ultimately we are in control of our own land and the type of landscape we wish to leave for future generations.

Ong Say Lin