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**LEISURE CHOICE**

# Speaking up for FROGS

They may be small and seemingly insignificant but, if frogs are wiped out, it will have an effect on human life. Such is the delicate balance of Nature, writes **MAJIDAH HASHIM**

A large, close-up photograph of a green Wallace Tree Frog perched on a person's hand. The frog is the central focus, with its large, prominent eyes and textured skin clearly visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

Like other frogs, this Wallace Tree Frog is actually a gentle creature

I HAVE a confession to make. I am – or rather – was one of those who had never been to Zoo Negara, nor had I ever had an inclination to do so.

It came as no surprise then that I had to be convinced that there was some measure of importance in taking on this assignment. Mind you, it was important for a cause – that of the survival of an ugly, slimy creature, the frog. That aside, I was hoping that it would turn out to be my Prince Charming!

So off I went to Zoo Negara in Ulu Klang, Selangor, on a sparingly cloudy Tuesday morning. The zoo that morning was vibrant and filled with scores of excited visitors – boys, girls, fathers, mothers, and evidently, all sorts of extended family members.

I met Zoo director Dr Mohamad Ngah who joined the outfit in 2005. Thanks to his exhaustive efforts, the zoo obtained its ISO 9001-2000 certification in 2006, as well official recognition from the South East Asian Zoology Association (Seaza) on Ethics and Animal Welfare Audit criteria.

What struck me as most interesting about Mohamad was his enthusiasm in the more scientific perspectives of running the zoo. His list of research connections spans to include like-minded scientists, biologists and microbiologists from Universiti Malaya, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) and networks of other academic research facilities and organisations locally and internationally.

When the issue of frogs was raised in the international scientific community, he seized the opportunity to champion their cause in the 2008 Seaza conference to be held in Kuala Lumpur next week from Jan 15-18.

The conference will raise awareness and understanding of the amphibians' plight among member zoos and others, to shout out the message of conservation as far and wide as possible and to identify the needs and gaps in research and management where amphibian captive rearing programmes are concerned.

### **Chytrid, What?**

Aside from the common threats of habitat loss, invasive species, chemical pollution and climate change, Mohamad tells me that there is a new threat to the frog species, a fungus called Chytridiomycosis (Chytrid). What is known about Chytrid is that it was originally discovered in Africa in the 1970s, and for a long time, it was contained in that continent.

The accidental transportation of infected frogs however, spread the fungus over to the USA, UK and Australia, and before long, to many other unsuspecting countries around the world.

The discovery of this fungus came about when the world scientific community came together to figure out the drastic decline in several frog species around the world. It was only then that they realised that the accidental movement of infected frogs was what brought about the extinction of several species in North, Central and Southern America and Eastern Australia.

Further research found that while Chytrid is actually a water- and soil-based fungus, it has mutated, and frogs are the first vertebrate creatures to be infected by it. Such is the delicate equilibrium of life that forums such as Seaza 2008 strive to impress. There are

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A tiny brown tree toad hangs on for dear life



Reza holding a tiny brown tree toad

over 200 species of frogs in Malaysia and all of them are said to be vulnerable to the Chytrid fungus.

The profile of over 300 species of frogs and their effective and sustainable breeding techniques will be discussed at the conference. Participants will also deliberate on facilities and technologies used in such research, its management and fundamentally, its contribution to education.

### Heed The Frogs!

I know what you are thinking. Frogs? Eew! That was exactly the response I got from almost everyone that I mentioned the assignment to, aside from of course, a few blokes who

humoured me with delectable claims of deep fried frogs legs, and a handful of genuine nature enthusiasts. At the heat of it all, frogs remain an enigmatic and misunderstood creature to most of us.

Back at the zoo, Amphibian and Reptile curator Dr Mohamed Reza Tarmizi held a tiny tree frog for me to shoot, with my camera. I hesitated, worried that it would leap at me and splatter goo all over my lens.

Reza insists that frogs are gentle creatures and that even the slightest harsh touch could tear its skin. The male Wallace Tree Frog stares at me with two wide eyes protruding largely from its head. It was a shy little thing and tried to turn away from me, ever

so politely. It did not even croak. The emerald green creature personified nature's message of simply wanting to be left in peace, unprovoked.

What has Mohamed got to say about the much-misunderstood frog? Well, to begin with, frogs eat mosquitoes and that has got to be a major contribution to the environment and human sanity. Without frogs, predators like snakes will need to find some other animal to eat and humans are not that high up in the food chain for it to swallow.

So that delicate balance of life affects all life on Earth. Yes, even us humans.