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By **RICHARD LIM**

# Give it a thought

**You can't get rich doing environment work, say most parents. Four Malaysians talk about why they are in this field despite such views.**

**W**HILE most people marvel at the breathtaking wonders of nature seen on National Geographic and Discovery Channel documentaries, few think about an environment-related career.

When planning for the future, conventional wisdom is often the order of the day - why go into waste management when you can take up business administration and probably make lots more along the way?

One person who has bucked the trend is marine biologist Affendi Yang Amri, 38, a specialist in coral reef studies.

While conceding that his job may not pay all that well, the Universiti Malaya (UM) lecturer has no regrets getting deeply involved with the environment.

"It has a different form of reward," he says.

"Diving among the corals conducting research gives me great satisfaction and I've seen mass coral spawning - the process where coral reefs simultaneously release eggs and sperms for reproduction - along the entire 3,000km stretch of the Great Barrier Reef.

"The process is very beautiful, very much like reverse snowfall and I'm glad to have experienced it."

After graduating in Ecology from UM, Affendi obtained a Masters in Marine Biology from the University of Sydney and then to return to Malaysia to join the Ecology and Biodiversity programme in his alma mater.

Today, he teaches coral reef ecology and the science of swimming and diving - a subject that focuses on underwater research methods as well as survival skills. An active researcher, he is rarely on campus as he is often at coral reef hotspots like Pulau Tioman and Pulau Layang-Layang.

Sometimes, students join him in his research.

"Malaysia is home to some of the world's best flora and fauna and it is good for students to experience this to understand nature's intricacies," he says. "They will also see the point in conserving the environment and appreciate the value of research."

In doing research, he cautions, observation sometimes takes months and a good hypothesis and correct methodologies may not be enough at times to yield results - external factors like hazardous weather may hamper work.

Also, it is a constant race against other researchers.

## Excited about the environment

While he admits that few Malaysians are keen to pursue an environment-related career, Affendi can take heart in that Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)



Affendi surveying reefs in Pulau Tioman waters using a video-camera. - KEE ALFIAN

**»Dealing with the environment is a complex issue«**



DR G. BALAMURUGAN

the day, it is not just a numbers game. Environmental journalism is a good way to highlight the state of the environment to the public."

And, she adds, environmental science is a good career field to go into as there are many pathways.

"Apart from environmental journalism, one can branch into such areas as environmental consultancy, waste management and agriculture research," she observes.

## Lots of leeway

ERE Consulting Group managing director Dr G. Balamurugan, 44, is living proof that Yeo is right about opportunities in the field.

"Our work comes in various forms," he says.

"When the Government wants to clean a river, we study the extent of the pollution and recommend the measures it should take. If someone wants to set up a steel mill, we provide advice on how to reduce and control pollution."

Dealing with the environment, he points out, is a complex issue.

"But people may not understand this and we constantly hear questions like: 'Why isn't this factory closed?' and other grievances regarding construction or landslides."

This is where companies like ERE come in. They evaluate environmental concerns along with engineering, social and economic issues before making a recommendation - which may influence the final decision - to the Government or private firms.

"Sad to say, the environment does not always win," Dr Balamurugan says philosophically, adding that one has to balance passion for the job and emotional detachment.

A civil engineer by training, Dr Balamurugan points out that while exposure to environment-oriented programmes is a plus, those trained in other disciplines can excel if they have the right skills that can be cross-applied.

He also dispels the myth that anyone opting for environment work must settle for a low pay and be prepared to face much frustration.

"The misconceptions could not be more wrong as this field has a big market," he notes.

"The job is exciting as people are paid for benefiting the community while pursuing their environmental passions."



**AFFENDI:** It has a different form of reward.



**MEERA:** But the media can play an important role.



**YEO:** It is a good career field to go into.

Environmental Science students Meera Devi Daran, 21, and Yeo Bee Geok, 22, are keen on environmental journalism.

Meera, who aspires to work for National Geographic one day, feels that people must know the environment for what it is and not based on how it has been branded by others.

"Society needs to be aware that new environmentalism is actually a luxury and it is very different from simple living, where people cut down on electricity and water consumption and waste," she explains. "Not everyone can afford organic

food or hybrid cars."

As she sees it, a lot of environmental issues are connected to poverty, and it is unavoidable for some developing nations to contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and deforestation.

"But the media can play an important role in ensuring that extraction-based economies conduct operations on a sustainable level," she adds.

Yeo concurs that there is a need to be big on awareness when it comes to the environment:

"Policies can be passed but at the end of

## Do you know?

The global atmosphere has warmed **0.74°C** over the past century. Temperatures will climb **0.2°C** per decade for the next 20 years. If the hikes exceed **1.5 to 2.5°C**, some 20% to 30% of plant and animal species will face the risk of extinction.



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