

LIFE & TIMES **GREEN**



# Tales of courage and sadness

*Malay Tapir adult and calf by Carl Traeholt.*

One way to get children interested in environmental conservation work is through storytelling, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

has no clue what the parent is talking about. She cannot identify with or interpret the message. She was probably not even born when the tsunami happened.”

Partly blaming today’s adults, he adds: “Instead of encouraging children to explore their surroundings, many parents today keep them indoors. Children are not allowed to play barefoot in the garden or in the rain. They can’t go into the forest because there are mosquitoes. I have university students who are even afraid to jump over a stream.”

Furthermore, the messages are so generic that no one really listens to them. “Take something like *Cintailah Sungai Kita*. Do you think it works? The word *kita* means our; so the message is telling us to love our river. But which river? *Cinta* means love. How do you love a river? None of this is personalised and it means nothing to people.”

Dr Mano’s approach is to use the interpretation of such words to tap into a person’s emotions. “When you can have an effect on someone’s emotions, you can get a behavioural response. Let’s go back to that statement. If you said, *Cintailah Sungai Klang*, you’re closer because it’s a little more specific,” he says.

“However, you may find that there are people who don’t know where the Klang River is. So again, they don’t relate to it.”

Essentially, people are not persuasive when they communicate the kind of efforts needed to ensure that conservation works are being carried out.

#### GUIDE BOOK

This is the enormous problem that Dr Mano and Dr Evelyn Lim Ai Lin, 38, are trying to address.

They are authors of a newly-pub-



**Prof Dr Manohar Mariapan (left) and Dr Evelyn Lim Ai Lin with their book, *Kaedah Interpretasi dalam Pengajaran Pendidikan Alam Sekitar (Methods of Interpretation in Teaching About the Environment)*.**

lished book called *Kaedah Interpretasi Dalam Pengajaran Pendidikan Alam Sekitar* (Methods Of Interpretation In Teaching About The Environment). It is a guide for teachers and provides an introduction to the use of interpretation as a persuasive communication tool in school. The aim of the interpretation model is to influence the behaviour of students.

Their research took two years and a nationwide study involving 600 students from nine secondary schools in the country. The results showed that with interpretation, the teaching and learning process became more enjoyable.

What was taught was more relevant to students, provoked their thoughts

and emotions as well as established a connection between the topics in focus with their experiences.

Last October, their research was awarded the Gold Medal at Universiti Putra Malaysia’s Invention, Research and Innovation Exhibition 2014.

#### CONSTRUCTIVE TEACHING

Dr Evelyn shares a specific example to showcase her experience teaching students about the Malayan tapir.

“The first step,” she says, “was to ask simple questions such as ‘what is a tapir?’”

Then she showed the children a

picture of a tapir and asked them what they thought about the animal. Some liked it and many thought it was odd-looking.

“There were a few,” she says, “who kept quiet. When we probed further, we found that they thought it was a wild boar and, therefore, *haram*.”

Once the researchers were able to identify such misconceptions, they were able to set the children right and move on to tell the children the positive aspects of the tapir. This they did by using various techniques, one of them being, storytelling.

“The Chinese have a tapir story called Si Pu Siang. The story says that the tapir is like four animals, yet like nothing on earth. It has the toes of a rhinoceros, the body of a wild boar, facial features of a horse and a proboscis,” says Dr Evelyn.

Once the children are engaged with the story, she talks about the importance of this animal to our ecosystem.

“I actually froze some tapir dung to show to the children. I wanted them to see how important this animal is in helping to disperse seeds in the forest.”

Not one bit repulsed, the children were actually thrilled and said that the tapir’s dung smelled like *rendang* (dry curry).

With their interest in the animal piqued, Dr Evelyn then shared the main message of the entire exercise: That tapirs are victims of indiscriminate habitat loss and we’re losing them fast. We need to protect their habitat, the forest.

To reinforce the message, she then shared stories of tapirs, namely, Tahan, Megat, Kai and Im (see side bar).

Finally, she asked the children a very pertinent question: “Can you

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**Megat**, the tapir who fell into a *monsoon drain*.

PICTURE FROM THE BORNEO POST



**Kai** was knocked down by a vehicle along the *Karak-Kuantan* highway.

PICTURE BY LAN CHING FONG – WWF-MALAYSIA

imagine yourself as Megat, Kai and Im? How would you feel and what would you do?” Both researchers say that since many of the children were from schools in Pahang and they knew where the Karak-Kuantan highway is, the response was more emphatic. They were more willing to be engaged with any conservation efforts she shared with them.

#### WORKSHOPS FOR TEACHERS

In collaboration with the Malaysian Nature Society, Dr Evelyn and Dr Mano plan to organise a series of teachers’ workshops to share their research. Dr Evelyn is aware that it’s an uphill struggle because children are likely to be more interested in gadgets than the environment, but as she says: “We can’t wait until it’s too late before we start. We have to start now.”

## TAPIR UNDER THREAT

FOR now, it is said that the tapir in Malaysia is less under threat than other animals like the tiger or elephant. However, with increasing deforestation, the tapir is losing its habitat and many conservationists feel that if no effort is made to protect it, it will be critically endangered.

Here are stories of the four tapirs which Dr Evelyn Lim Ai Lin shared with students to get them engaged in conservation work.

#### TAHAN

Tahan’s mother was shot as she was mistaken for a wild boar. She was then rescued and taken to a rehabilitation

centre. Sometime later, Tahan was born. He was fortunate because he was born in the safety of the rehabilitation centre and was quite a happy fellow.

#### MEGAT

Lost, Megat strayed into a housing area near Kuantan and couldn’t find his way home. Unfortunately, he fell into a monsoon drain. He endured hours of pain before he was rescued and later released into the wild.

#### KAI

Kai was knocked down by a vehicle along the Karak-Kuantan highway. Nobody stopped to help her. But

everyone slowed down to have a peek. She was in great pain and suffered an agonising death. Even then, it was hours before the authorities came to move her lifeless body from the highway.

#### IM

Four years old, this precocious tapir was enjoying himself in the forest when his right foot was caught in a snare. The more he tried to set his foot free, the more the snare cut into his flesh. He was finally rescued and treated. Due to the severity of the injury, his foot had to be amputated. Just when things were on the mend for this tapir, the wound developed an infection and he died.