

# The last green mile

Our environmental champions, activists and conservationists reflect on the year that was and the way forward, writes **Elena Koshy**

**A**S I see it, 2019 has been a year of irretrievable losses. From the forest fires of the Amazon and Indonesia (and many other parts of the world) to losing our last Sumatran rhino and reading of the plight of our indigenous communities who have long been guardians of our natural heritage, it seems like conservation has been on the backburner of many governments' policies and priorities.

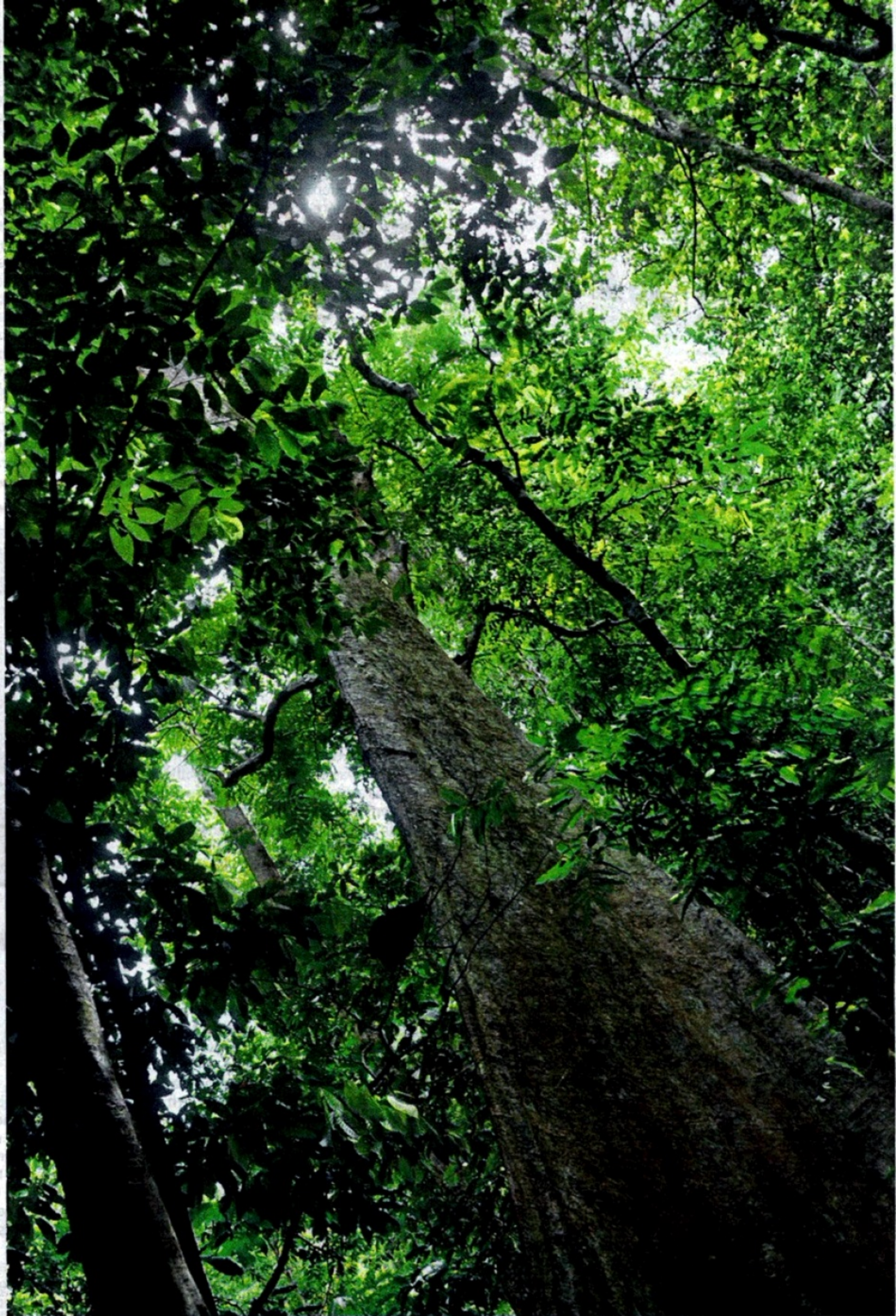
Nature should be conserved because of its intrinsic worth, and not only because of its immediate usefulness to humankind. But in the 21st century, as populations expand and people encroach ever further into the last remaining wild places, attention towards protecting our flora and fauna species as well as the wellbeing of our indigenous communities have become inseparable from the wellbeing of the planet.

Yet the perennially low level of concern, which flickers upwards momentarily when disaster strikes, then slumps back into the customary stupor, is an almost inevitable result of a society that has become restructured around politics, ambition and the pursuit of money. Do we really care for nature? Can we make a difference?

How we break the circle and wake people up is the question that all those who love the living planet should address. There will be no easy answers. We live in an extraordinary time. A time where logging, forest burning, poaching, introduced pathogens, climate change, overfishing and ocean acidification form the handiwork of one single destructive species — man. The last mass extinction which decimated our dinosaurs some 66 million years ago was caused by an asteroid impact. This time, the asteroid is us.

Perhaps by recognising this, we can begin to imagine creating a different one — one that preserves, as much as is still possible, the wonderful diversity of life.

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## DR EVELYN LIM AI LIN

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### REFLECTIONS

In Malaysia, we're never short of environmental education programmes. It's very encouraging to know that despite the slowdown of the economy, the government, corporate sectors, non-governmental organisations and local communities are committed towards implementing various environmental education programmes.

It isn't surprising that most Malaysians possess some basic knowledge about air and water pollution, deforestation, solid waste, flood, haze, global warming and climate change. But many do not fully understand the implication of our current environmental concerns and are less likely to commit or act on these issues. Studies have shown that Malaysians are selective towards committing to an environment cause, i.e. those issues that "are in my backyard" and/ or if they provide some form of personal gains such as saving money.

Being aware about an environmental issue doesn't always lead to behavioural change. This is attributed to how we talk about such issues. We're guilty of using technical terms and jargons to explain complex natural phenomenon and issues that in turn, become incomprehensible, irrelevant and unimportant to the layman. We alienate man from his environment instead of linking man with nature — the connections and relationship we establish with our natural envi-



*Dr Evelyn Lim Ai Lin (second from left).*

ronment in our everyday lives. We fail to make people understand that we're part of the environment system and that nature belongs to everyone. Failing to understand the basic relationship, coupled with the complexity of green issues have resulted in many shying away from being part of the solution.

### HOPES

Environmental education is an organised effort to teach about the processes and functions of the natural environment, how human beings can manage their behaviour and ecosystems to live sustainably. I hope initiatives can be taken to coordinate, strategise and

synergise the various environmental education initiatives in the country so that the development and implementation of environmental education is clear and well directed.

As environmental educators and conservationists, we have an important voice and are story tellers of our natural environment. Let's not drown important messages with technical terms and jargons that end up making environmental issues beyond people's comprehension. We need to work closer to make environmental issues relevant and important to all. Conservation does not happen with just technology. Conservation begins with people.