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Yell-ing for change

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ENVIRONMENTAL issues in global affairs are gaining prominence as countries recognise the importance of collective action to deal with challenges that confront our planet.

These concerns, which stem from human activities, fall in the realm of environmental diplomacy. Three main challenges that we have to grapple with are climate change, biodiversity loss and plastic pollution.

The world was quite quick to catch on to the first two problems, which led to the signing of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at the landmark Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992.

Over 97% of scientists agree that humans cause climate change. The accelerated burning of fossil fuels and deforestation have led to rapid increases of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Thirty years after Rio, the world is still struggling with climate change. At the 2015 Paris Agreement, the agreed goal was to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels.

Failure to do so would result in large-scale drought, famine, heat stress, species die-off, loss of entire ecosystems and loss of habitable land, resulting in more than 100 million people falling into poverty.

Halting biodiversity loss is another big headache for the global community. Several decadal efforts to stop biodiversity

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Crucial for youths to be involved in environmental diplomacy



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Youths must start to look at local issues such as the impact of plastic pollution on the turtles in Terengganu.
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loss have ended in failure.

The 2019 report by the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services declared that up to one million species of animals and plants were under threat of extinction, many within decades, due to unbridled human activities. This would be the largest loss of life since the dinosaur wipeout.

But all is not lost. During the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the CBD in Montreal, Canada, last December, UN member states agreed to adopt the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) to address biodiversity loss, restore ecosystems and protect indigenous rights.

The plan includes concrete measures to halt and reverse nature loss, including putting 30% of the planet and 30% of degraded ecosystems under protection by 2030 (30x30 target). It also contains proposals to increase financing to developing countries where most of the biodiversity is found today.

Greener generation

The generation that is most responsible for these calamities is fading away. The new generation – today's youths – has to pick up the pieces and find a lasting solution to the imbroglio. Indeed, there are encouraging signs that

the youths are up to the mark in facing these challenges.

In a regional biodiversity poll conducted by Atri Advisory in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines in February last year, almost all, or 96%, of the respondents (1,000 per country) supported efforts to stop biodiversity loss, with young people, between the ages of 18 and 24, being the most supportive.

Of all the respondents, 84% wanted the government to support the global target of setting aside 30% of our lands and oceans for protected areas by 2030.

While there is no shortage of news coverage on environmental degradation, the discussions are

often framed from the perspective of developed countries, far from our Malaysian context and daily lives.

It is vital that we harness the ambition and potential of the youths to create big impact. With that in mind, Amanah Lestari Alam (ALAM), in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in Malaysia, introduced the Youth Environment Living Labs (Yell) in 2021.

Aiming to engage five million youths in three years, Yell is looking to help local youths find their voices in environmental action, and to amplify the existing sustainability efforts locally.

It is no longer just about the melting ice in the North Pole, but more about emphasising the destruction of our mangrove forests, the impact of plastic pollution on the turtles in Terengganu, or the cries of our indigenous communities who are impacted by overdevelopment.

One of the most consistent young champions of the environment is the Regent of Pahang, Tengku Hassanal Ibrahim Alam Shah. Recently, in reference to climate change, he reminded the youths to pay greater attention as "it is their generation who will live to see the outcomes of their swift and dedicated efforts to bring back the forests and biodiversity".

The future survival of our planet rests with our youths. But they must be steadfast. In the words of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, "We can't save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to be changed. Everything needs to change, and it has to start today."

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