

ACBeats

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ASEAN cities and local governments crucial to biodiversity conservation, too



At least 70 per cent of biodiversity policies are being implemented at the local and subnational levels, yet they are not always profiled. There is, however, growing recognition of the vital contribution of cities and subnational governments in meeting the global biodiversity goals and targets, and ASEAN cities are urged to support this exciting development.

On 8 March, the National Parks Board (NParks) of Singapore and the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) jointly organised the ASEAN Webinar on Cities' Contribution to the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework to discuss how ASEAN cities can further bolster their commitment to act for nature conservation and climate change and to encourage ASEAN cities to sign up to the Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity.

The Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity was drafted from a series of consultations with subnational governments and regional, city, and local authorities led by the Scottish Government together with the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in view of the anticipated post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

To date, over 200 governments have signed to commit to act for nature conservation and climate change in the coming decade. This cooperation aims to facilitate the alignment of global biodiversity strategies, actions, monitoring, and reporting efforts across all government levels, contributing to meaningful long-term biodiversity impacts and goals from the local leading up to global levels.

Furthermore, the commitment is set to enable its signatories to have access to more resource mobilisation opportunities for biodiversity at subnational or local levels;

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ASEAN cities and local governments crucial to biodiversity conservation, too

mainstream biodiversity concerns across sectors; and have access to opportunities for biodiversity knowledge exchange across all sectors.

Paul Dale from the Government of São Paulo, Brazil, shared that as part of the Edinburgh Process, ASEAN cities may receive more support to increase concrete actions and outcomes for biodiversity in the coming decade.

“The consultations during the Edinburgh Process indicate that the subnational and local government should not just be considered as a stakeholder and that their competency and implementation should be recognised in the framework,” said Dale.

In the past years, ASEAN cities have been rapidly moving towards urbanisation, prompting populations from regional provinces to flock to urban areas for better economic opportunities. This growing density of people in cities has resulted in the further conversion of key ecosystems and the decline of biological diversity.

Mobilising subnational and local city governments in mainstreaming and integrating biodiversity into urban planning is crucial in the conservation of existing natural areas and biodiversity in cities.

During the webinar, the ASEAN Member States (AMS) expressed its readiness to sign up as a city-state to the Edinburgh Declaration on biodiversity and encouraged other ASEAN cities to be part of the network as well.

“Cities can play a significant positive role in addressing the challenges of biodiversity conservation and climate change,” said Dr. Lena Chan, Senior Director for the International Biodiversity Conservation Division of NParks Singapore. “We seek the full support from the ASEAN Member States to adopt the plan of action at CBD COP 15.”

Chan also encouraged cities to apply the Singapore Index as a tool to evaluate and monitor biodiversity conservation efforts. With Singapore leading urban biodiversity conservation in the ASEAN region, Dr. Chan encourages the adoption of the revised Singapore Index on Cities’ Biodiversity or The Singapore Index.

The Singapore Index serves as a self-evaluation tool for cities to measure and monitor biodiversity and efforts to conserve it using 28 indicators based on the core components of native biodiversity, biodiversity-provided ecosystems services, and biodiversity management and governance. Guided by the principle “if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it,” this tool can assist cities in gathering valuable information and baseline data to better inform their programmes and policies on managing the manifold impact of cities on biodiversity and vice-versa. Ingrid Coetzee, Director of Biodiversity, Nature, and Health ICLEI-Cities Biodiversity Centre South Africa, emphasised that while biodiversity policies are negotiated and adopted at the national and global levels, the success of implementation lies on the support of the subnational and local levels where majority of the implementation happens. She added that there is a need to support the Declaration as well as the Plan of Action on Subnational Governments, Cities, and Other Local Authorities for Biodiversity (2021 – 2031).

“The Plan of Action is ...there to support state parties in their efforts to reach national and global targets for biodiversity, and develop National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans that are right for their circumstance,” said Coetzee.

Dr. Theresa Mundita Lim, ACB executive director, closed the webinar by expressing the ACB’s commitment to supporting the Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity and to rolling out the Singapore Index on Cities’

Biodiversity in the ASEAN. She also lauded Singapore for its strong leadership and commitment to cities and urban biodiversity conservation in the region.

“For us in the region, our shared understanding of biodiversity as the centrepiece of regional economic recovery and resilience-building is recognised by several regional frameworks, such as, among others, the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework,” said Lim.

Lim also said that a draft regional statement will be created from the outcomes and insights shared during the workshop. She emphasised that the regional statement demonstrates the AMS’ unity and cooperation in advancing regional sustainable development.

There are more concerns to address [in the aspect of biodiversity and cities’ sustainable development], said Lim. “I am confident, however, that we can figure out our way forward to respond to all these, as one regional community, inspired by this year’s ASEAN theme, ASEAN ACT: Addressing Challenges Together.”

The Handbook on the Singapore Index on Cities’ Biodiversity can be accessed through the CBD and NParks official websites:

bit.ly/citiesbiodiversity

Coming together to protect the critically endangered pangolin



Shy, slow-moving, and mainly nocturnal. They live in forests and grasslands, finding tree hollows or digging deep burrows to sleep and rest in. And when threatened, they curl up into a ball, their tough and thick scales acting as armour to protect their soft bellies.

Meet the pangolin: a unique, prehistoric mammal that has been around for 80 million years. Today, their species are under constant threat from poaching and trafficking, but with governments, conservation groups, and individuals coming together, they may have a shot at survival.

There are eight known species of pangolins spread across Asia and Africa. All are listed in the threatened tier of the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

In Southeast Asia, two pangolin species consider the region their home: the Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*) and the Philippine pangolin (*Manis culionensis*).

Found in Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam, the Sunda pangolin covers the most geographic range in the region. Pangolins found

in the Philippines, particularly in Palawan Island, were previously thought to be *Manis javanica*, until recently recognised as a distinct species endemic only to the island.

Like their pangolin siblings across the world, the Sunda and Philippine pangolins have long snouts and tongues, which they use to eat ants and termites. They are mostly covered in protective scales made of keratin, the same substance that makes up hair, fingernails, and horns. These scales, unfortunately, are highly sought by poachers due to cultural beliefs that they possess medicinal properties.

Under threat

Both species found in the ASEAN region are considered critically endangered. Due to their elusive nature, these species are hard to find, so there is scant knowledge about their behaviours and few reliable population estimates.

“Every part of the pangolin has some value in trade: its meat consumed and its scales used in traditional medicine,” said Nosrat Ravichandran, a protected area specialist of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB). “They are also threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation, which causes

them to be easily accessible to poachers.”

The name pangolin is derived from the Malay word *penggulung*, which means roller. Against poachers and hunters, this defence mechanism has unfortunately become the species’ vulnerability, as they become easy to pick up once they roll up into balls.

Stories of these little pangolins published across the Internet, more often than not, are depressing stories that tell of their status as the world’s most trafficked mammals.

At least 895,000 pangolins from Asia and Africa have been trafficked internationally from the beginning of the millennium up to 2020. A study by international non-governmental organisation TRAFFIC found that an estimated equivalent of 7,634 Philippine pangolins was documented to have been confiscated from illegal trade and trafficking between 2000 to 2019.

Aside from these seizures, 2,870 frozen Sunda pangolins, weighing over 10 tonnes, were discovered in a vessel that ran aground in Tubbataha Reef in 2013.

Public awareness and citizen action

But growing appreciation about the plight of these wild animals, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which has its roots in wildlife trafficking, can turn the tide on their plummeting population.

The ASEAN Member States (AMS) have different wildlife laws that seek to protect endangered animals such as the pangolins and conserve their habitats. All AMS are also signatories to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Wild Fauna and Flora, which ensures the regulation of the trade of wild animals and plants.

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Get to know the Voices of ASEAN Biodiversity: Alex Rendell and Katrina Kendall

Meet and know more about the initiatives of two of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity's (ACB) #WeAreASEANBiodiversity ambassadors, Alex Rendell and Katrina Kendall, who are both lending their voices to the three-year campaign to raise public awareness and mobilise support for biodiversity conservation across different sectors.

Alex Rendell

Alex Rendell is an actor and singer from Thailand and National Goodwill Ambassador of the UN Environment Programme who, after earning his Master's degree in environmental social science from Mahidol University, immediately put his passion and knowledge into good use by starting the Environmental Education Centre (EEC).

He co-founded EEC together with Toey Jarinporn Joonkiat and veteran conservationist Alongkot Chkaew. EEC aims to open the eyes and hearts of kids to the beauty of their environment and the need

to protect their country's rich biodiversity.

Rendell's passion for biodiversity conservation began at a young age when he learned about the need to protect elephants, the gentle giants that are icons in his home country. EEC's founders believed it was best to work with children, whose minds and hearts can be moulded towards caring for the natural world, with many of the participants already showing signs of becoming budding environmentalists even before they started the programme.

The young actor said many of their camp participants often come back every year, bearing stories of how they joined green clubs in their schools or that they started their initiatives to save animals. Some have gone to university influenced by their takeaways from the camps, choosing careers in sustainability and environmental science.

With EEC, education goes beyond the four walls of a classroom. Instead, participants join a variety

of camps that bring them to the great outdoors, such as amid forest wildlife in Doi Inthanon National Park in northern Thailand, or among colourful marine life in picturesque Krabi in the southwest part of the country.

When children participate in the camps, they don't only learn about the ecosystems. More importantly, they see firsthand what needs protection, and what they can do in their small ways.

The main takeaway that he wishes every child would have after each camp is that humans and nature are intricately intertwined.

"We always try to make sure that everything we teach... you have to link it back to the person," he said. "You really have to understand how these are linked, like the forest up north with the whale sharks down south... I think that's the mentality we're trying to get to."



Katrina Kendall

Katrina Kendall is a 32-year-old British-Filipina best known for her stint in the pageant world when she bagged Miss Earth England in 2015. But Kendall, a scientist by training, was not simply vying for a bejeweled crown, but for a platform to forward positive environmental change. Her diversity of environmental experiences by being exposed to two different worlds: the lush tropical ecosystems in the Philippines, and the beautiful parks and great outdoors in the United Kingdom, has sparked her strong interest in protecting and conservation of the world's natural resources.

Today, Kendall is a leading environmental ambassador, working with several organisations that advocate for ocean protection and biodiversity conservation. She also serves as a Department of Environment and Natural Resources protected areas ambassador for the Mount Kitanglad Range Natural Park in Bukidnon province.

Currently, Kendall is busy further deepening her knowledge in biodiversity work. She is currently taking her doctorate at the University of Oxford, researching the effectiveness of nature-based solutions, with a focus on the

Philippines and the wider ASEAN region.

Initially, her study focused on mangrove ecosystems, but he decided to broaden her scope and explore solutions to address climate change and sustainable developments in the Philippines. Now, her research aims to look closely at these solutions' value, limits, and evidence of effectiveness to ensure that they receive proper attention, funding and policy support.

While still very early on in her research, the scientist-slash-beauty-queen already looks forward to potentially organising workshops and learning opportunities with Filipinos back in her home country to hear their perspectives and learn from their experiences as well.

If all goes well, she hopes to potentially scale up her project across the ASEAN region.

"Biodiversity is what underpins all life on earth, so if we harm biodiversity, we harm ourselves. That's why, from a fundamental perspective, we have to protect and conserve it," Kendall said.



Coming together to protect the critically endangered pangolin



Beyond government policies and regulation, citizen science and involvement are crucial in ensuring that these pangolins would continue living their shy and quiet lives in the wild for the next 80 million years.

To raise public awareness on biodiversity conservation, the ACB has launched a three-year campaign called #WeAreASEANBiodiversity.

“[The] regional campaign, which promotes sharing of inspiring biodiversity stories, can also be instrumental in building stronger partnerships between public and

private sector to participate in conservation actions,” said ACB Executive Director Dr. Theresa Mundita Lim.

Dr. Arvin Diesmos, director of ACB’s Biodiversity Information Management unit highlighted the campaign’s crucial role in popularising science, laws, instruments, and statuses of the species and their habitats for many different sectors, especially among the youth.

Diesmos also emphasised the need for the public to know their

right sources of information about biodiversity and the natural environment.

“The work of researchers, scientists, conservation biologists, and citizen scientists is more important now than ever before, especially in generating the right kind of scientific information, both technical and popular,” he said.

Lim said the ACB has been working with different sectors to protect and care for these shy and elusive creatures. Initiatives such as the ASEAN Heritage Parks Programme seek to support areas of high conservation importance that often host pangolins and other wildlife species.

“Keeping pangolins safe means not only protecting their populations in the wild but also the ecosystems that serve as their natural habitats. Integrated actions that include curbing poaching and wildlife trafficking, habitat protection, and improving the socio-economic conditions of the people living in and around pangolin range areas are encouraged,” said Lim.

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ASEAN kicks off programme for youth storytellers



The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) is tapping into the power of the youth to tell stories from the field about biodiversity, its values, and the many ways to safeguard it.

Through its newest programme, the Young ASEAN Storytellers (YAS), the ACB is calling all ASEAN youth to showcase their skills and talents in storytelling as an essential part of the bid to highlight what life in harmony with nature would look like.

Twenty budding content creators and storytellers from Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam will get first-hand experience in impactful storytelling for biodiversity conservation.

“We at the ACB believe that this generation is the torchbearer of our region’s future. We see that the youth of today are more driven to contribute to saving our planet, most especially in conserving the region’s rich natural and cultural heritage, and

we are proud to be amplifying their voices through this programme,” said ACB Executive Director Dr. Theresa Mundita Lim.

Lim also underscored the importance of the youth’s role in connecting with others, given their knack for using innovative online platforms and their wide reach. These platforms and tools can cross boundaries and connect communities across the region to find solutions to the multiple environmental challenges we collectively face.

ASEAN youth aged 18 to 35 who are eager to explore, passionate about nature, and are good storytellers are encouraged to be part of YAS. Stories created through photography, writing, art, filmmaking, or other forms of creative storytelling and conveying ideas are welcome in this new programme.

Exciting opportunities await the young aspirants. Aside from the grant that they will be receiving to produce their stories, they will undergo a

series of learning sessions with biodiversity and storytelling experts, as they embark on an immersive trip to the region’s ‘creme of the crop’ protected areas—the ASEAN Heritage Parks. The YAS will then create compelling biodiversity stories that will be shared across media platforms.

The YAS programme is supported by the European Union (EU), through the Biodiversity Conservation and Management of Protected Areas in ASEAN (BCAMP) Project; and the ASEAN-Germany Cooperation in Biodiversity through the Institutional Strengthening of the Biodiversity Sector in the ASEAN II (ISB II) project and the Small Grants Programme (SGP).

Find out more about the YAS programme and the AYBP by visiting the website:

Young ASEAN Storytellers (YAS) | AYBP (aseanbiodiversity.org)

ASEAN calls for whole-of-community approach to restore forests



The tropical forests of the ASEAN are vital to global environmental sustainability and stability. A biodiverse region that boasts of high levels of species endemism, the countries of the ASEAN harbour over 200 million hectares of forest, encompassing at least 60 per cent of the world's tropical peatlands and over 40 per cent of mangroves. These forests are critical habitats to diverse forms of plant and animal species, many of which are found nowhere else in the world.

These ecosystems generously provide food, fresh and clean water, medicine, shelter, and also serve as sources of energy. By stabilising climate, regulating the emergence and spread of novel diseases, purifying air and water, and preventing soil erosion, intact forests directly contribute to human health and safety. Spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, and recreation are also among the non-monetary benefits provided by the aesthetic and cultural values of forest ecosystems.

Despite these benefits, however, the ASEAN reported major forest

declines during the last four decades, losing almost half of its total forested areas due to persistent anthropogenic drivers. While the rate has slowed down, if not abated, the degradation of forests in the region will result in grave challenges, both for people and biodiversity. Every 21st of March, the world celebrates the International Day of Forests (IDF) not just to recognise the importance of healthy forest ecosystems in our daily lives, but also to remind ourselves of the urgency to protect and conserve this overdrawn natural resource.

A report on the State and Outlook of Agroforestry in ASEAN (2021) concludes that environmental disasters in the region cost over USD 122 trillion from the year 2000 to 2020, affecting over 324 million ASEAN people. In a region where half of the population directly or indirectly depend on forest resources, restoring the health and wealth of the ASEAN's forest ecosystems is a crucial step towards nature-positivity.

In this year's IDF theme, "Forests and Sustainable Production and

Consumption," the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity joins the ASEAN Member States in their commitment to promote the restoration and sustainable use of forest ecosystems. With the launch of the ASEAN Green Initiative (AGI), the region recognises the great importance of nature-based solutions to combat desertification, biodiversity loss, and land degradation.

The initiative aims to recognise ecosystem restoration efforts in the region, targeting at least 10 million native trees to be planted and nurtured across 10 ASEAN Member States over ten years. The numbers 10-10-10 is the region's collective commitment to support the United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration from 2021 to 2030. The AGI emphasises the importance of harmony between people and nature, ensuring that initiatives are ecologically sound, sustainable, compliant with existing national policies and institutional mechanisms, and beneficial to local communities.

As the ASEAN gears up for economic recovery, we continue to take guidance from our leaders

Act together for the wetlands



As the global community observes World Wetlands Day, and the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) joins the celebration and the resounding call for the conservation and restoration of wetlands across ASEAN and beyond. This year's theme, Wetlands Action for People and Nature, underlines the importance of wetlands in sustaining the ASEAN people's health and livelihood.

The ASEAN is endowed with close to two million square kilometres of inland waters and wetlands and comprise 60 per cent and 42 per cent of the world's tropical peatlands and mangrove forests, respectively, that provide significant economic and livelihood benefits to the people. More than one billion people in the world depend on wetlands for valuable economic activities, such as irrigated rice farming, water provision, energy sourcing, and tourism.

Significantly, wetlands are central to the solutions to climate change. Healthy peatlands possess a unique carbon storage function, with twice the capacity of the world's forest to prevent carbon from escaping into the atmosphere. Degraded wetlands emit copious amounts of carbon that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Land development programmes and natural resources extraction that do not take into

account the value of wetlands will be unsustainable, losing more investments to stave off impacts that coastal and inland ecosystems could naturally prevent. A study undertaken by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources; the TEEB Philippines (The Economics of Ecosystem and Biodiversity in the Philippines); and the Resources, Environment, and Economics Center for Studies in 2014 even points out that the net benefits from the development of portions of the Manila Bay is greater if there is added ecosystem rehabilitation integrated into the plan. At the COP26 last year, as the call for zero net emissions were raised, the critical role of wetlands as among the nature-based solutions was underscored along with urgent actions such as mobilising finance for the conservation of these vital ecosystems.

Inland waters provide vital life services to all. These ecosystems serve as home to unique vegetation and organisms that help wetlands serve many functions. However, habitat loss due to anthropogenic drivers is bound to displace the wildlife species – a number of which act as natural virus reservoirs – and increase the risk of direct transmission from wildlife to domestic animals and human populations.

With the many benefits wetlands provide, whole-of-society actions become all the more urgent. Ensuring healthy and well-managed wetlands requires the engagement of different stakeholders: communities that directly and indirectly benefit from wetlands; business and industry sectors that contribute to the local economy; academic and research institutions that contribute to the growing body of knowledge relevant to conservation; and the local, national, and regional governments responsible for developing and implementing policies – we all have a stake in responding to the call to wetland action.

This timely celebration of World Wetlands Day is a reminder of the urgent collective action needed to curb wetlands degradation and biodiversity loss. It is also fitting that the first official World Wetlands Day – after the United Nations declaration – is observed under the able chairship of Cambodia – with the theme ASEAN ACT: Addressing Challenges Together. Against this backdrop, we continue to be guided by the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework that moving beyond silos and mobilising cross-sectoral support is a clear way forward to overcome the crises our world is facing today.

Addressing continuing risks of infectious diseases, FAO partners with ASEAN in mainstreaming biodiversity into health

In light of the continuing threats to public health posed by the emergence of diseases and new COVID-19 variants, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) are aiming to strengthen capacities in mainstreaming biodiversity into health frameworks and systems.

The ACB and the FAO signed an agreement to strengthen collaborations among ministries of natural resource management, forestry, and wildlife in ASEAN under the One Health approach in the broad aim to prevent the spillover and emergence of infectious zoonotic pathogens at the source.

One Health is a collaborative approach across sectors and disciplines with the goal of achieving optimal health outcomes cognisant of the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment.

“The crisis brought by the COVID-19 pandemic sheds light on how our public health and wellbeing rely on healthy ecosystems and rich biodiversity. This partnership is timely as we gear towards recovery from the pandemic and build our long-term resilience from similar crises,” ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita Lim said.

Lim said considering the rich biological diversity of ASEAN, it is important that the region is cognisant of the relevance of this natural wealth in reducing the risk of future pandemics, considering there may still be around 1.7 million viruses believed to be found in various species of mammals and birds, and up to half of these could become infectious to humans.

“We are entering an era of pandemics, as scientists have earlier



warned, and tackling ever-changing challenges requires an integrated and holistic approach, one that pays due attention to our shared environment,” Lim said.

The number of Omicron cases rose exponentially across the world, causing further impacts on lives and economies.

Responding to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ASEAN Member States (AMS), composed of Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam, adopted during the 37th ASEAN Summit in 2020 the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF).

The ACRF provides a blueprint to guide collaboration action among partners, including ecosystem-based approaches to increase resilience from future pandemics, and continuous promotion to mainstream biodiversity across relevant sectors.

Under the agreement between the ACB and the FAO, a regional implementation plan that will be

developed will complement existing cooperation among ASEAN and other relevant bodies.

The ACB will likewise work with the FAO on the two virtual learning centre training modules currently being developed and aimed to promote the importance of biodiversity, ecosystems, and the environment among the veterinary and public health sectors.

The ACB is an intergovernmental organisation facilitating cooperation and coordination among the 10 AMS on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of such natural treasures.

Among its current projects linked to integrating nature in public health concerns is the development of a biodiversity-focused surveillance mechanism for new and emerging diseases as well as small grant support to manage wildlife-human interaction and address zoonoses at the source.

Collective actions key to recovering wildlife species



Approximately 20 per cent of the planet’s vertebrate and plant species are found only in the ASEAN region and nowhere else in the world. Home to four biodiversity hotspots and three of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world, the ASEAN has extraordinarily high levels of species richness and endemism. And these numbers could keep growing. According to experts, the region is in an “age of discovery,” with more than 2,200 new species described between 1997 and 2014 alone.

For a region that is home to a diversity of wildlife, this year’s World Wildlife Day theme: Recovering key species for ecosystem restoration resonates strongly with the ASEAN. Some of the region’s economic prosperity is underpinned by the healthy wildlife that thrives within us.

Our agri- and floricultural industries continue to flourish, thanks to the almost 5,000 species of economically important crops including food crops, medicinal and ornamental

plants, bamboo, timber and other tree species in our region. This is further enhanced by the presence of key species such as pollinators and seed dispersers that make it possible to propagate and expand our vegetative cover naturally. The ASEAN is home to a diversity of birds, bats, and insects like honey bees—with eight out of the nine known species of honey bees native to and present in the region.

Native wildlife is an intrinsic part of the ASEAN culture and identity. Our intimate connection with nature inspires a common understanding of shared responsibility to care for and protect not only vital sources of traditional foods such as grains, yams, and beans; but also resources that inspire our many rituals and ceremonies. The presence of wildlife voyagers on seas (such as dolphins, marine turtles, whale sharks, and humpback whales) and on air (such as native and migratory birds) that forage, breed, and traverse our healthy ecosystems symbolise our trademark ASEAN hospitality.

However, increasing threats put these important species and their habitats under severe pressure. The 2019 collaborative report Halting Species Extinctions in the ASEAN region by the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission’s Asian Species Action Partnership (ASAP), observed that many species are more threatened here than in other regions.

According to the report, initiatives to save wildlife are currently being done at the national level. However, there is still about 45 per cent of critically endangered land and freshwater vertebrate species in Southeast Asia that also require conservation prioritisation—and to scale up efforts to halt the extinction of these key species also means ensuring cross-sectoral and cross-boundary cooperation.

A number of recommendations on recovering key species in the region based on a comprehensive review of threats, area-based conservation

Collective actions key to recovering wildlife species



measures, ongoing conservation efforts, and policy context in the ASEAN are listed in the report.

First is protecting the ecosystems that serve as wildlife habitats. By strengthening area-based conservation measures, particularly in protected areas and ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHPs), threatened species that inhabit these remaining biodiversity-rich places can be recovered. This strategy would entail ensuring effective management and governance of these protected areas, which the AHP Programme is currently undertaking. The

ASEAN flagship programme supports the management and capacity development of the 'best among the best' protected areas through various activities such as training programs in taxonomy, monitoring, enhanced database management, ranger and patrolling activities, equipment support, and development of communication, education and public awareness (CEPA) strategies, among others. There are currently 50 AHPs and more than 2000 protected areas across the 10 ASEAN Member States. National, regional, and international policies and frameworks on

protecting wildlife are already in place and in fact already operationalised. The report recommends further strengthening of legislation, particularly on wildlife trafficking and improving compliance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). It should be emphasised, however, that protecting key wildlife requires further investments and research in field-based protection, combating wildlife trafficking, and reducing demand for wildlife products.

Finally, we are reminded by this year's ASEAN theme, ASEAN ACT: Addressing Challenges Together, that recovering key species needs robust, collaborative actions among stakeholders across the 10 ASEAN Member States (AMS) and beyond. Wildlife knows no boundaries – they roam, they grow, and they thrive across areas within their habitat range that often transcend physical and political divides. Thus, transboundary cooperation is particularly essential to ensure that different policy, legal, and institutional mechanisms, as well as management and governance regimes, respond to diverse social, cultural, and economic contexts.

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and various stakeholders as we reconcile how economic growth and biodiversity conservation are to be seen as complementary sides of one coin.

Nature-based solutions, such as nurturing native tree species and ensuring plant and crop diversity, are poised to provide greater short- and long-term ecological and economic benefits for people and nature. Based on recent scientific studies, cases in the region that exemplify the use of multipurpose trees on land near forest habitats,

have contributed to the offsetting of local dependence on natural forests while maintaining local biodiversity and supporting the conservation of water and soil.

However, restoring the health and wealth of the region's forest ecosystems requires a whole-of-society approach. Hence, the AGI aims to recognise greening initiatives of any scale—be it a large-scale tree planting activity initiated by an organisation or a small-scale tree planting activity organised by the youth in an ASEAN community.

In the face of the multiple challenges we are currently facing, we are encouraging everyone to plant and grow a tree and be part of a regional call for collective action to make ASEAN greener and healthier than ever.

The ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity is the secretariat of the ASEAN Green Initiative. The guidelines for the nomination of forest restoration initiatives under the ASEAN Green Initiative can be accessed at www.agi.aseanbiodiversity.org.