



Photos: courtesy of APE Malaysia



# Going Ape: Sustainable Development and Habitat Restoration through Ecotourism

GREETINGS, and welcome to the *Living Lab at E-Lab!* Last week we looked at Eco-tourism as a means of sustainable economic development. This week, Fareea Ma, Managing Director of APE will join me as we examine a Malaysian project which aims to restore natural habitats, while offering education and sustainable economic activities to communities by harnessing the economic inflow and the energies of eco-travellers visiting the beautiful state of Sabah.



business, leadership and entrepreneurship. In the process, their appreciation of local history and the surrounding environment tends to increase as well. Local people become more aware of the need to conserve and protect the environment and its resources, while building an economy designed to support their protective efforts. Below we will look at a project which meets Living Lab's criteria for a model of sustainability which integrates humanity, environment and economy for the good of all involved.

## Environmental Degradation and Rural Economic Decline

Over the past decades, rural to urban migration has accelerated greatly worldwide due to the forces of development and urbanization. This demographic shift has brought depopulation and economic downturn to many beautiful remote areas around the planet. Environmental degradation has been advancing alongside the demographic shifts as land is cleared for agriculture, forests are logged; resources are extracted and so on. *University of Malaya's Living Lab: For the Sustainability Sciences* promotes sustainable economic revitalization and development through activities in which local flora, fauna, hydrology and soils of the place they visit. They become aware of the impacts—both good and bad—that their presence in a locality may bring, choosing to use the time at their destination for enhancing and 'leaving something good' for the community and the environment. At the same time, members of the community learn about sustainable

## Non-formal Education for Visitors and the Local Community

Ecotourism of the sort promoted at the *Living Lab* places great importance on the education of visitors and locals alike. Visitors learn about the history, the people, flora, fauna, hydrology and soils of the place they visit. They become aware of the impacts—both good and bad—that their presence in a locality may bring, choosing to use the time at their destination for enhancing and 'leaving something good' for the community and the environment. At the same time, members of the community learn about sustainable

## APE Malaysia's Reforestation & Habitat Restoration Programme in Sabah's Corridor of Life

APE Malaysia provides experiences which encourage visitors and communities to make sustainability, environmental conservation, animal welfare and human development a part of their daily lives. Today's focus is on their reforestation and habitat restoration activities in the Corridor of Life, located in the state of Sabah.

Individuals participating in this programme want to make a difference in the place they travel to. They pay for the experience, which is designed to place them in direct interaction with the local community. Part of their money goes into tree planting and the payment of wages to people employed for restoration activities. Another portion goes into boats, cooks, lodging, and education programmes—which all benefit the local community and economy.

In APE Malaysia's view of sustainability, people, habitat and animals must all come together in a way that makes economic sense. Iconic local animals like the sun bears, pygmy elephants and orang-utan attract attention. Since people relate deeply to these animals, facilitators can bring home issues on threatened environment, challenges faced by the local communities, government and organisations by

telling the story of these endangered species. When participants work to preserve the habitat of the wildlife, they also help ensure that the community does not lose its livelihood and way of life. Local children, youth and adults work alongside the participants, and many become stakeholders who choose to engage in ongoing conservation efforts long after a group of participants have left.

Another important component of conservation involves scientists who conduct research on the habitats and the wildlife. As their findings are disseminated, people come to know more about the place, its creatures and the community. This, in turn, attracts more visitors -- who leave more money in the local economy. Meanwhile, scientific information continues to attract attention and more funding. Responsible funders sponsoring research activities are just as important as funders directly involved in the preservation of wildlife and their habitat. They ultimately all bring more members of the community on board the conservation circle.

APE Malaysia uses information provided by the scientists while working with communities, teaching them along with programme participants why the habitat is important and why it must be restored. As locals and visitors grow in consciousness, they work to preserve the environment, which creates a virtuous circle where stakeholders, visiting participants, the animals and the local environment are all enriched. All this makes economic sense, since participants pay to come and volunteer their time working toward habitat restoration, which works for the good of the animals and the environment, while increasing the money flowing in the local economy which benefits the community, and so on.

In addition to habitat restoration work, participants work with local children during an environmental education session. An educational objective is set, and the participants create games, activities and songs to enhance the children's learning. Participants also share about the culture and the environment in their home countries; so the children's world view expands, and their English skills and general knowledge increase in the process.

"Eco-tourism" is the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry worldwide. Well-designed programmes, like those of APE Malaysia provide experiences which help revitalize the local economy. They offer education, knowledge and skills, as both locals and foreign participants work to restore local habitat, flora and fauna. Done properly, Malaysia's natural beauty can continue to attract eco-travellers to communities where the people, environment and economy can all benefit from their presence.

The APE Malaysia programme in Sabah provides a good example of what can be done for the good of all involved.



Please join us next week when we will take a look examine ecovillage projects springing up in different parts of the world. Until then, *jumpa lagi!*