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'We are at war with nature' – and we urgently need to make peace

By DR JEMILAH MAHMOOD



In the battle to ensure humankind's survival on this planet, the loss of one species – like the Malayan tiger – might not seem like a lot. Yet every single animal and plant we lose forever is another step towards the extinction of the human race. – Filepic/The Star

I wrote in November 2022 about the outcome of COP27, the meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention in Egypt (Nov 6-18). In December 2022, the 15th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity met in

Montreal, Canada (Dec 7-19). Ten thousand people registered for this COP and more than 30,000 attended COP27. That's a lot of people – so why is progress on environmental issues so difficult?

At the Biological Diversity COP, a chilling warning was issued by the head of the United Nation's Environment Programme: "As far as biodiversity is concerned, we are at war with nature. We need to make peace with nature. Because it is what sustains everything on Earth... the science is unequivocal," said Inger Andersen.

The outcome of the Montreal meeting will need to tackle "the five horsemen of the biodiversity apocalypse" – land-use change, overexploitation, pollution, the climate crisis, and the spread of invasive species.

The draft targets included in the global biodiversity framework involve proposals to protect 30% of land and sea, repurpose billions of dollars of harmful subsidies for nature-friendly investments, and tackle invasive species.

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Here is clear recognition that planetary health is essential to human health.

Make no mistake, these global processes, big and ponderous as they appear, are an essential element of our collective effort to ensure the health of the planet is protected and, in turn, that human health outcomes are improved. But they are only part of the equation – and the targets are only targets unless and until they are met.

Governments have never met UN biodiversity targets in full and climate change commitments went into reverse at the Egypt gathering last month. So the question must be, who is responsible for this backsliding? Who is responsible for the fact that here in Malaysia we are emitting almost three times more carbon per head today than in 1990 and are in the top 30 global emitters per capita? And what can we do about it?

My sense is that while we are all worried by the state of the planet, we're also at a loss about what we can do.

The arrival of a new government provides the opportunity for a reboot of our collective ambition. The newly created and warmly welcomed Natural Resources, Environment and Climate Change Ministry has its work cut out and so it is gratifying to see the words “climate change” in its title – a recognition of the urgent need to up our game.

Minister Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad has articulated four areas of focus: floods, energy use, climate change and environmental protection. I would also request the Prime Minister and his Cabinet focus on several more specific issues as well:

Firstly, the government should continue to support the National Planetary Health Action Plan, which is being coordinated by the Academy of Sciences Malaysia. Recasting the relationship between people and planet will help us all understand our roles in addressing the challenges we face.

Secondly, this work must be linked to the health white paper that was started under the previous administration, for an urgent realignment of our health system following the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Thirdly, in September 2021, the 12th Malaysia Plan (2021-2025) promised legislation on climate change to increase coordination and enhance the effectiveness of climate change actions, with a new law expected in 2024. Getting commitments codified in law will help us to move forward and provide clarity on what we are supposed to do.

Finally, as we gear up to take our turn as chair of Asean in 2024, our administration needs to know it can and should play a leading and transformative role.

The new Asean Vision covering the period 2025 to 2035 will be elaborated during 2023 and 2024 with Malaysia holding the pen. Ensuring that the document recognises the need for sustainable development, supports concrete actions to address the climate and biodiversity crises, and identifies a way to bring the three Asean pillars – political-security, economic, and social-cultural – together will be vital. It will prepare a pathway for our region to lead global efforts on developing a planetary health-oriented post-2030 agenda.

Already the UN is planning a Summit of the Future in September 2024 that will involve heads of state. Malaysia, both in its own right and as incoming Chair of Asean, working closely with Indonesia as 2023 Chair, can play a key role here in laying out our plans and those of the Asean region.

Time is short, but opportunities for our country to exert leadership domestically, regionally and internationally in the fight to turn things around has never been greater nor more urgent while at the same time providing us with potential for a collective sense of optimism – if we all work together.

Dr Jemilah Mahmood, a physician and experienced crisis leader, was appointed the executive director of the Sunway Centre for Planetary Health at Sunway University in August 2021. She is the founder of aid organisation Mercy Malaysia and has served in leadership roles internationally with the United Nations and Red Cross for the last decade. She writes on Planetary Health Matters once a month in StarLifestyle.