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Volunteers are making the world a greener place.

# Planting the future

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**W**ADING knee-deep through thick mud under a sweltering sun, with your hands covered in muck, probably isn't a typical way of spending a weekend. There must be some explanation, however, to the rising number of people who are doing just that.

Operating as a mini army of volunteers, these tree planters would car-pool their way to various sites in Selangor and proceed to plant hundreds of tree seedlings in the ground.

Choy Kim Lee, 24, and Bernard Eng, 23, have been on frequent trips to Section 13 in Shah Alam. Young, passionate and driven by a common goal, the two are part of a growing generation of green-minded individuals.

Mobilised by the relatively recent revelation of social networking sites, finding a cause and acting on it has never been easier, and this has helped to foster a network of volunteer junkies adept at organising themselves through such mediums as Twitter, Facebook, and an ever expanding blogosphere.

Having met as participants in a United Nations conference a few years ago, it was Eng who first invited Choy to go tree-planting at Sungai Damansara.

Choy recalls how surprised she was, on her first trip, at seeing so many youths participating in the event. "There were bus loads and bus loads of them."

The collective effort resulted in the planting of 25,000 trees along Sungai Damansara as part of a wider Shah Alam River And Trees For Life project organised by Shah Alam City Council, Sathya Sai Organisation, the Department Of Irrigation And Drainage, Forestry Department, and Forest Research Institute Malaysia.

The project aims to breathe life back into the city's landscape by creating natural and shady paths along the river, which can be used



## Growing trees:

Volunteers planting tree seedlings on a bank of Sungai Damansara in Shah Alam, Selangor. Many Malaysians do not mind getting their hands dirty when it comes to greening the earth.

Bernard Eng and Choy Kim Lee are sowing the seeds for a more sustainable future.

by the community to experience the simple joys of nature. Once grown, the trees will also stabilise the river bank by helping to prevent erosion through an extensive root system, and encourage biodiversity at the same time.

Trees have been planted in various parts of Shah Alam, including Taman Bukit Jelutong in Seksyen 08, Dusun Tasik Seksyen 7 and the Sungai Renggam river bank at Section 15.

Recalling his first tree-planting session four years ago, Eng describes what drew him in: "You get to touch the earth with your bare hands, and then you get to watch the trees grow over time from the first day you planted them. It gives you a kind of indescribable satisfaction."

"After that experience which took place against the pitiful backdrop of the Raja Musa Forest Reserve, a heavily degraded peat swamp forest



in north Selangor which has suffered from decades of logging and illegal clearing for the purpose of agriculture and human settlement, he became hooked.

He had heard of the tree-planting events organised by Ecowarriors, a collective of like-minded people who mobilise themselves through the Internet to promote activities which support an environmen-



tally friendly lifestyle. He became a regular on their trips and by default found himself organising various tree-planting projects through the Ecowarriors Facebook page. Between 100 and 300 volunteers join the tree planting each time.

Choy enjoys tree-planting for reasons similar to Eng's, and thinks it's a great way to improve landscaping and the community's quality of life. Aside from the common perception that tree planting can combat global warming by increasing the earth's carbon sink, she thinks the activity has a greater role when it comes to spreading awareness about global environment issues.

"People need to ask, why are we here, planting trees? In school, I learnt about global warming in text books. We know what it is, we know what CO2 does, all that stuff comes up in our exam questions. But they don't ask us, what can we do for the earth?" she points out.

She says schools need to play a bigger role in encouraging awareness and critical thinking when it comes to tackling looming environmental issues. Waste management, the coming energy crises ... these are problems which, she says, require solutions.

"I think this is a task not just for youths, who need to advocate for change, but also for teachers

who can play a role in encouraging young people to think about these issues."

Both Choy and Eng have chosen careers which will allow them to, in one way or another, play a small role in shaping the future.

Choy shares: "I graduated with a degree in Biomedical Sciences from Universiti Malaya in 2010 and am going to continue my studies with a Masters in Public Health. I am particularly interested in the impact of environmental change on public health, for example, how global warming can lead to spikes in malaria cases."

Eng, on the other hand, has gone for a more lucrative trade - chemical engineering. He is currently finishing his final year at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and hopes to start a career in the field of renewable energy.

"In my course, we learn a lot about green technology stuff, like designing plants. Right now, I am doing a project on hydrogen technology, which may one day support hydrogen as an alternative fuel to oil and gas."

For now, these dreams will have to wait.

Among the thousands of trees being planted along Sungai Damansara are fruit trees such as mango, durian and guava. The plants grow but inches per year, but then again, caring for the environment is a game of patience.

Choy and Eng are dedicating their future towards a greener, more sustainable tomorrow. But just like their tree-planting activities, it will be the generations of the future who will benefit from the scrumptious fruits of their labour.

■ To join Malaysia's growing community of tree-planters, go to [www.ecowarriors.blog.com](http://www.ecowarriors.blog.com) or [www.facebook.com/groups/ecowarriors-malaysia](http://www.facebook.com/groups/ecowarriors-malaysia). The National Tree Planting Campaign portal, [www.treesforlife.gov.my](http://www.treesforlife.gov.my), provides regular updates on various tree planting activities.