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By TAN CHENG LI and S.S. YOGA

THE environment is big news these days – climate change, sustainability, recycling (aka the 3Rs – reduce, reuse, recycle) and biodegradable are some of the buzz words the majority of newspaper readers know. But back in the 1970s and 1980s, the local media hardly gave much space to stories that touched on the environment. Yes, basic issues like garbage and sewage were discussed but nothing more complex like climate change and losing biodiversity.

By the early 1990s, though, there was growing interest in the state of our planet as the world geared up for the first ever global summit on the environment, to be held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In Malaysia, *The Star* had begun publishing articles on local environmental issues such as development and deforestation in the news pages.

SwitchUp.TV (*The Star*'s online TV channel) senior executive producer Tan Ju Eng remembers those days. In 1990, she was *Sunday Plus* (the feature section in the *Sunday Star* then) assistant editor; she and Michael Aeria (then *Sunday Star* editor), together with others in the company's top management, decided to feature more environmental stories, beginning with a campaign.

The idea at first was to join the then Selangor State Government to mark some sort of Malaysian Environmental Day in August 1990. "So we planned a series of stories to appear in conjunction with that day. The stories would appear in *Sunday Plus* and the Tuesday edition of *Section 2*," explains Tan.

She points out that *The Star* also wanted to promote recycling and the planting of trees, so, in a campaign sponsored by the Parkson company, we offered seeds to readers in exchange for old copies of *The Star* that were then sent for recycling. In the end, the state government dropped the idea of marking the day but, as Tan explains, "We decided to do it ourselves anyway and in October that year we ran the stories and asked people to plant their seeds during that time."

There was good reception from the public and the readers. It also marked the first time a dedicated section addressing environmental issues was started in any Malaysian newspaper.

"Of course, in the early years it was all about basic education and not about big issues, because being environmentally conscious was not part of the psyche of Malaysians yet."

The next year, in 1991, *The Star* organised an event with the **Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM)** in June to mark World Environment Day, which is celebrated on June 5 annually; it was called Green Day. And throughout the years many incarnations of Green Day has been organised by the paper, many of them at FRIM.

Since those early years, *Section 2* / *Star2* has maintained a green crusade, highlighting how ill thought-out development projects and unbridled consumerism have ravaged our landscapes, killed off wild species and left us with worsening pollution and a carbon problem.

Throughout the 1990s, features on unsustainable development were a staple in the pull-out. When the controversial highland highway was mooted in 1997, *Section 2* ran the series "Highland – Our Vital Peaks" to highlight the importance of montane habitats for water supply, wildlife and the weather, as well as the development pressures facing Cameron Highlands, Fraser's Hill, Genting Highlands and Bukit Larut.

The 1998 "Green Battles Won?" series charted several green battlefields in the nation's environmental history – development threats to Templer Park and Batu Caves, and the Papan-Bukit Merah radioactive waste issue – and highlighted how victory was short-lived in many cases.

From the late 1990s to early 2000s, *Star2* writers won top awards at the ICI-CCM Environmental Journalism Award for their

Greening of the media

In the 1990s, the idea of activism journalism began to spread around the globe, even making it to local shores. Where newspapers traditionally stood back and merely reported on events, the new idea was that the media could be proactive and even espouse causes affecting its readers' lives. With *Star2*, it began with environmental issues.



If Malaysia has a high level of environmental consciousness today, it's due to the many green battles won and lost over the last 20 years. In conjunction with National Environment Week (Oct 21-27) which begins tomorrow, *Section 2* re-visits some of those battlefields which were landmarks in our nation's environmental history. The week-long series which begins today, however, highlights the fact that in many cases victory was short-lived. Our first story takes us back to a quiet corner in Perak which erupted in controversy when village folk took on an international conglomerate over radioactive pollution.

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Green battles

insightful and comprehensive coverage.

Section 2 was already touting the importance of clean energy back in 1996, with its series on renewable energy. The topic remains a mainstay in *Star2* today as we experience the effects of a changing climate, and as the need to wean ourselves from fossil-fuel-derived energy grows in urgency. We also took proactive steps when necessary, such as in October 1997, when a bad bout of haze hit the country – *Section2* held a campaign called "Care for



Telling image: (Left) The *Section 2* cover that marked World Environment Day in 1990; June 5 that year was a Tuesday and this cover marked the beginning of our Tuesday focus on the environment. (Pixman Ng Kok Leong who took the picture is currently *The Star*'s photo editor.) (Below) The award-winning *Green Battles Won?* series of stories revisited previous issues Malaysians had grappled with.

Green focus: (Left) A diary of events from one of our environment-focused events held at Kuala Lumpur's Forest Research Institute of Malaysia. The events encouraged readers to spend a day amidst nature while learning about how they could help the planet. (Below) Evocative covers helped draw attention to complicated green issues.



branches, beetles, orchids, birds and frogfish. Success stories – such as the creation of new parks, aborted destructive development projects and wildlife rescue projects – have also filled our pages.

As green consciousness grew in the 2000s, we interviewed "eco-warriors" and highlighted how these individuals and communities champion green causes. Coverage also grew to include solutions, rather than reiterating the same environmental woes. Our column "Waste Watch" (2005 to 2006) best reflects this direction; it promoted waste minimisation through stories on reuse and recycling of materials such as plastics, tyres, paper and rubber, as well as various recycling initiatives by charitable groups and the private sector.

To mark World Environment Day we have published special supplements, with readers welcoming our tip sheets that show how they can help reduce waste and water and energy use.

Between March 2009 and October 2011, the first Tuesday of the month saw *Star2* dedicated as *The Green Issue*; the first half of the pull-out contained environmental stories, especially those skewed towards "green living", to guide readers towards a more sustainable lifestyle.

As our ecology continues to face an onslaught of threats, readers can be assured that *Star2* will continue to highlight that Green, matters.

Walking the talk: We didn't just point out problems; we also tried to help readers do something about the issues.