

Headline	Inspiring tech-savvy kids to plug into nature		
MediaTitle	Focus Malaysia		
Date	01 Nov 2014	Color	Full Color
Section	Supplement	Circulation	20,000
Page No	17	Readership	60,000
Language	English	ArticleSize	785 cm ²
Journalist	JUNE MOH	AdValue	RM 13,516
Frequency	Weekly	PR Value	RM 40,548



Inspiring tech-savvy kids to plug into nature

As green spaces in urban areas continue to shrink, encouraging children to connect with nature becomes even more urgent. One environmental organisation shows the way



by JUNE MOH

FIVE-YEAR-OLD Wilson's life revolves around the tablet, laptop and smartphone.

And, like other tech-savvy urban children, he has developed a greater bond with gadgetry and technology than wildlife and nature.

But recently, Wilson made a new discovery that changed his perception of everything around him. His parents signed him up for The Jungle Class organised by Tatana Roots, an environmental organi-

sation that strives to connect people with nature through conservation initiatives, community projects and public campaigns.

The class Wilson attended was held at the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM). He had his first real-life encounter with insects and plants, took his first trail in the woods and explored the forest.

The maze of foliage at FRIM filled him with wonder. He was overawed by his first sight of a bug, and was more than a little scared at his first encounter with a leech.

In the car on the way home after The Jungle Class, Wilson asked his parents when they would make another trip. He is not alone. Many first-timers and children who have been there have asked the same question.

For the kids

Suzane Samy is the woman behind Tatana

Roots. Formed in 2009, the organisation introduced The Jungle Class as one of the environmental activities targeted at urban children aged two to seven years.

"Awesome" and "love it" are the more common responses from children on their first visit.

For urban kids, the first encounter with nature usually comes when they start school, but not all have the benefit of a walk through a forest.

"Going to the park is about as much exposure to nature as they get. But going into the forest enables them to learn about the ecosystem," Suzane explains.

Today, children have few opportunities to connect with nature so they miss out on the many benefits enjoyed by their parents during their childhood back in the *kampung*.

"There are not enough places for chil-

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dren to go to. Parents sometimes think it is dangerous to go on nature trails,” Suzane says. “I realised that there was a lot of potential in educating children about the environment.”

With The Jungle Class, Suzane hopes to create opportunities for children to learn with their five senses – sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. Children learn best through an all-encompassing experience.

“For instance, children learn about crickets through flashcards but they have not even heard the chirping of a cricket in real life,” she points out. “Or if you talk about a leaf to a child, he may think that all leaves are green when the fact is that there are purple and pink leaves too. Children are inquisitive and this is the best way to teach them about nature.”

Children’s reactions to their first encounter with nature are as varied as Mother Nature’s abundance. Some just close their eyes to listen to their surroundings such as the chirping of birds and insects. Others equate worms with snakes.

While the trails can be difficult for some, most emerge happy at the end of the day. Parents who initially think nature is hazardous realise that with proper supervision, it is quite safe.

“It is also a way for parents to bond with their children. Parents are not encouraged to just leave their children with us. They should enjoy the bond with nature as well,”

Suzane says.

Positive change

These activities help to transform children quickly. Some get excited and want to touch everything around them but others can be quite reserved because nature is an unfamiliar surrounding for them. For instance, seeing a leaf with hair is an experience for them. Some want to touch it while other just run and cry.

In The Jungle Class, children are free to explore on their own but must ask before touching anything to ensure it is safe to do so.

Trips involve hiking up steep terrains, hopping across streams and squeezing through narrow trails. Children get the chance to frolic in shallow streams in the shade of the trees.

Research has shown that alienation from nature causes diminished use of the five senses, causing attention deficit and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. These are not only harmful to children but will also put the future of our environment at risk.

If children are connected with nature, they are more likely to be interested in their environment and in taking part in nature-based activities. They will enjoy it and want to savour it – now and in the future.

Suzane founded Tatana Roots for this reason.

She says she has gained so much from her outdoor experiences, such as a sense of

peace, physical and mental strength and an appreciation for the beauty of nature.

She wants to expose urban children to similar experiences, she says.

The Jungle Class has grown over the years and has received requests from the public and schools to replicate the programme in other states.

Many children and parents, through her programmes, gain a sense of pride after conquering their fears of navigating through a forest by learning to adapt and to interact with nature.

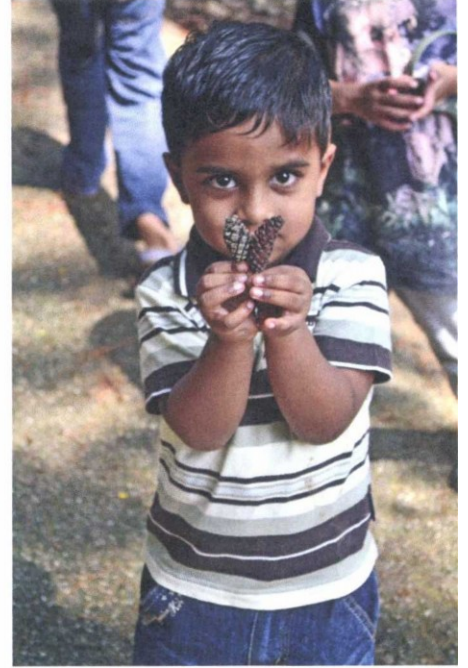
Children from urban homes can benefit by unplugging from technology and plunging into the unstructured play found in the outdoors. Such play develops critical thinking, empathy and social skills in children. **FOCUS**

SABAH-BORN Suzane Samy is a biotechnology graduate from University Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas). Her initiative, Tatana Roots, pays tribute to her ethnicity – Suzane is part Indian and part Dusun Tatana, an ethnic community mainly found in the Kuala Penyu district in Sabah.

She has been involved in environmental and conservation work ever since graduating from Unimas.

Prior to establishing Tatana Roots, she devised and facilitated environmental educational programmes for children aged two to six at her first job with Malaysia Nature Society as conservation officer.

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Students having a ball during The Jungle Class



Suzane Samy, founder of Tatana Roots

Schooled to love her surroundings



Tatana Roots conducts The Jungle Class