

# *Making ‘environment-plus’ the future of conservation*

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For The Straits Times

A day after environmentalist Jane Goodall spoke to a full house at the National University of Singapore (NUS) where I teach, a friend asked me: “How is the environmental movement going to survive in a post-Jane Goodall, post-David Attenborough world?”

Both are eloquent communicators about the state of the environment, and communicate with credibility, sharing their experience in a way that conveys the wonder and joy of nature. Yet, both are also in their 80s.

Dr Goodall began her lecture with an early memory, recalling how as a young girl she had wandered into a hen house and waited for hours,

curious to see a hen lay an egg, while the police and her parents were all anxiously looking for her. Instead of scolding her when she finally emerged, her mother patiently listened to her excited account of how a hen lays an egg.

Told in her warm and calming voice, Dr Goodall’s story spoke volumes about the importance of parents in nurturing their children’s interests.

In a time of escalating environmental destruction, biodiversity loss and climate crisis, is gentle storytelling enough? In contrast, the voice of 16-year-old activist Greta Thunberg brims with anger and outrage. The global social movement she has sparked indicates that many feel the same.

Should environmentally concerned individuals go back to the days of angry confrontations,

with activists distancing themselves from the mainstream and haranguing others?

As long as the environment or environmentalists are viewed as separate and distinct from other spheres of human endeavour, we will not make much progress.

Instead, I believe we need to take what I call an “environment-plus” approach, with environmentally concerned citizens striving to make the environment a part of and not apart from any human activity.

In this climate crisis, the role of protecting and safeguarding the environment falls to every single leader, regardless of where they work and live. Several have recently risen to the occasion.

The New Zealand government has recently declared that it will use the environment as a lens for making all decisions. The Italian

government has decided that environmental education and knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goals will be a core part of every student’s education, like mathematics or languages.

Businesses in the B-Corp movement have pledged to measure both their financial performance and their social and environmental performance. The Singapore stock exchange has made board members responsible for environmental and social performance and governance.

Pope Francis, leader of the world’s 1.3 billion Catholics, has issued the *Laudato Si*, lamenting environmental degradation, and calling on followers to take “swift and unified global action” to care for our common home.

And the venerable medical journal, *The Lancet*, recently

launched a new journal, *Lancet Planetary Health*, dedicated to “the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends”.

These forms of leadership clearly signal placing a priority on the environment. They reflect the “environment-plus” model, embedding the environment into their areas of specialisation, decisions and everyday work and life. At individual, organisational or societal levels, the environment becomes a default consideration.

But “environment-plus” thinking should not happen by chance. Educational institutions have a responsibility to inculcate it. The complexity and multifaceted nature of environmental problems also mean that they cannot be viewed through a single lens. There are questions of justice and ethics.

In any environmental crisis, whether natural disasters like typhoons, or man-made ones like the haze, the elderly, young children and the poor are hardest hit. There are numerous questions about how we can do better.

How can businesses and countries continue to prosper while minimising environmental impact? How can we design and engineer our cities to be both environmental and healthy?

Beyond this, there is the big question of sustainable

development. How do we, in the words of the Brundtland Report, meet “the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”?

(One modest attempt to do so is the MSc Environmental Management Programme at NUS that uses a multidisciplinary approach. It is a collaboration by nine faculties and schools, from science and engineering, to law, business, government and health.)

In response to my friend, I would say the environmental movement should promote “environment-plus” thinking. Instead of distancing itself from others, it should collaborate and create the belief that everyone, whatever their occupation, sector of work or stage of life, can be pro-environment.

Collaboration means thinking across sectors and disciplines to address environmental challenges holistically. With these changes, the environmental movement can reduce its dependence on charismatic leaders and turn everyone into environmental actors.

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