

# Singapore students help fund clean water project in Bintan

This has enabled eco resort to build 500 sanitation systems in 2 years for residents

Ng Wei Kai

When Temasek Polytechnic student Stella Chan came across a project that would help households in Bintan get better access to clean water, she decided to pitch in.

She roped in three other students from her polytechnic and raised \$2,000 to fund a Safe Water Garden (SWG) sanitation system for the Suparno family who live on the island, located about an hour from Singapore by ferry.

Ms Chan, 19, a third-year veterinary technology student, said: "Working with and meeting the Suparno family helped me understand how much we take things like running water and sanitation for granted in Singapore."

The SWG water sanitation system was jointly developed by the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia, among others, with funding from the Dutch government.

Over the past two years, LooLa, an eco-adventure resort in Bintan, has set up more than 500 sanitation systems. This was done with the help of funds raised by students from schools such as Juying Secondary School, St Joseph's Institution (International), as well as Nanyang, Temasek and Singapore polytechnics.

Each SWG costs about \$2,000, and was originally meant to serve one household or a small school.

However, SWGs have recently been certified by the Indonesian government to be able to cater to up to 10 families each.

If not for the Covid-19 pandemic, the students would have gone to Bintan to help construct the sanitation systems.

Instead, due to travel restrictions, the students participated in Zoom sessions where they were paired with a family in Bintan. While the SWGs were being constructed by staff from LooLa, the students would befriend the families.

The SWGs work by taking wastewater from showers and toilets,



Students from Juying Secondary School helping to build a Safe Water Garden water sanitation system in Bintan in 2018, before the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, all sessions are conducted online due to travel restrictions, and the sanitation systems are constructed by staff from LooLa, an eco-adventure resort in Bintan. PHOTO: SAFE WATER GARDENS/ LOOLA

and feeding it into an underground tank.

This method replaces the more common options of wastewater disposal, such as feeding it straight into gardens or disposing of it in the open, which may lead to diseases such as dengue and cholera, said LooLa chief executive Marc van Loo.

The waste in the water dissolves in the tank and the nutrient-rich water is then used to grow crops.

Dr van Loo, a Dutch national who has lived and worked in Singapore and Indonesia since completing his PhD at NUS in 1994, is the co-founder of both LooLa and Safe Wa-

ter Gardens. He said his mission to improve sanitation for Indonesian families was prompted by the death of the daughter of a cook who had worked at LooLa. The death was due to inadequate sanitation in her home.

Since the SWG programme started in 2014, thousands of Singaporean students have participated in it, including more than 1,000 staff and students from Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP).

Mrs Wan-Koo May Yeok, assistant director for research, innovation, enterprise and projects at the NYP School of Health and Social Sciences, said: "We were keen to work

with LooLa as it was a meaningful project that allowed our students to be innovative and enterprising outside of their curriculum."

Working with the villagers online has not diminished the experience, she added. "Our students had a synchronous online and on-site experience with the overseas individuals, giving them valuable experience, even while physical travel remains limited for now."

Dr van Loo hopes to scale up the project beyond Bintan, to help bring safe water and sanitation to communities across Indonesia.

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