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Let's help improve the environment

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A VISIT to the Muir Woods National Monument, 19km north of the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco, is indeed a treasured experience. The scenery of the well-preserved redwood forest is picture perfect.

Among its variety of trees is a coast redwood more than 400 years old, twice as old as independent America itself. Imagine that this single tree has witnessed the trials and tribulations of the most powerful nation in the world today.

At Muir Wood, it is not unusual to come across blacktail deer playing police-and-thief with one another among the majestic trees.

In the creek below, one will not only find amphibians but crustaceans as well. It is said that in winter one can see migratory salmon occasionally leaping out of the chilly water, perhaps to gasp some fresh redwood-filled air.

Needless to say, the tour was an eye-opening experience too. The Muir Woods National Monument contains one of California Bay Areas' last uncut strands of old-growth redwood.

If not for the effort of philanthropists and conservationists, this forest too would have been the victim of the early Californian settlers.

Therefore, today, as the Prime Minister launches the National Environmental Week in Shah Alam, let's take a few minutes to ponder on what we ordinary Malaysians can do to improve our environment.

Last weekend at Bukit Jalil, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself planted a Kapur tree to kick off the "New Millennium Tree Planting" campaign held in conjunction with the World Habitat Day.

Within a minute on that beautiful Sunday morning, Malaysians all over the country planted more than 100,000 trees.

Although the planting of trees from a limited number of species will not bring back some of the richly bio-diversified natural forests that have been lost, campaigns such as this are vital to make Malaysia a garden nation by 2005.

In any case, more greenery means more leaves, and therefore more supply of oxygen. This would give us cleaner lungs. The eyes too are known to benefit from looking at the green landscape.

And on Wednesday, the Cabinet made the decision to shelve new development projects in Cameron Highlands, considering the extreme environmental hazards posed by the on-going forest clearing activities.

Development projects in other hilly areas too should be reviewed. A choice would have to be made of whether to continue with the deforestation of the highlands or to declare them a national heritage.

This heightened political interest and will indeed give us a much bigger hope that the future of our beloved environment is not being taken for granted. Complementarily, there must also be an equally strong social will toward making our environment a better place for everyone, not only today but in the future, too.

The social will could come from two major sources - the corporations and the consumers.

It is generally believed that some corporations and companies are not bothered about environmental destruction issues when there is a quick ringgit to be made.

They remain firmly entrenched in the industrialisation age mentality, where the environment is expected to take the brunt of the country's quest

for progress.

The examples of the developed, highly industrialised world is there for them to emulate. Why worry about the air quality? Isn't the atmosphere enormous enough to swallow every single molecule of toxic fumes released into it?

Why bother about the rivers and the oceans? Aren't they large enough to consume all the waste products and whatnots that are discharged into them day in day out?

What's the fuss about cutting down a few trees here and there. Isn't the country blessed with huge natural forests that would take ages to clear altogether?

These are but some of the simplistic arguments of those intent on making the pursuit of profit their lifelong crusade.

It is pointless to talk to them about the finiteness of the world's capacity to cope with man's greed and hunger.

It is difficult to impress on them that an almost unhindered exploitation of the earth in the last two hundred years has depleted much of its natural resources.

It is impossible to convince them that the continued release of waste and toxic materials into the air, rivers and seas, is causing a rapid deterioration in the global environment.

But alas there are companies that have long awakened from their slumber.

They realise that to keep making good profit and be relevant in the 21st century they have to embrace a positive environmental management strategy.

Thus, rather than adopting an exploitative approach to the environment, they have established a symbiotic relationship with it.

But today's symbiosis would naturally manifest in other forms.

For example, in addition to providing the much-needed greenery, large-scale afforestation could help prevent massive flooding in towns and villages. In addition, a controlled harvesting process would provide a generous income for the pulp industry.

Environmental protection also offers new business opportunities. Devising Malaysian-made environmentally friendly machines or procedures is vital to the economy.

We should not be dictated by ideas and equipment provided by foreign concerns alone. In view of the impending business opportunities offered by the green revolution, perhaps there is now a need to make each businessman aware of not only business management but also environmental management.

Otherwise, companies and corporations should also be encouraged to not only include financial auditing in their annual reports, but also environmental auditing.

The environmental audit reflects how much their businesses affect the environment, either directly or indirectly, and what are the measures taken to bring the situation back to equilibrium.

Yes, this is a tall order but not entirely impossible to implement.

Besides corporations, consumers too have to start exerting the social will to improve the environment. The "Green Consumer" concept should be embraced fully.

The traditional thinking is that in under-developed or developing countries, consumers have a strong tendency to place value for money before concern for the environment when purchasing products.

But do we have to accept this line of thought? Granted that you may not want to give up those extra sen just yet for the sake of the environment.

But you may want to change your habits a little bit to show that you care for the environment.

When was the last time you brought your own grocery bag to the supermarket? When was the last time you instructed your children to put

the rubbish in the bin?

When are local councils going to make us sort out our garbage into recyclables and non-recyclables? When are dog-lovers going to start scooping dog wastes and make our housing areas look less filthy?