

Bullied student rises to become champion for nature

By Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal - April 7, 2024 @ 9:30am



Group photo for Earth Hour 2024 – (from left) Yana, Murray Aitken (Hard Rock Desaru Coast general manager), Peter, Bonnie, Sanjitpaal, Yusuf and Sharon Teo (director of sales and marketing).

NESTLED within the tranquil embrace of Desaru Coast lies a beacon of sustainability and environmental stewardship: Hard Rock Hotel Desaru Coast, Johor. And at the heart of its conservation efforts is Siti Norazliyana Ali, affectionately known as Yana, the hotel's dedicated sustainability manager.

Her beam is wide as the bespectacled, tudung-clad lady makes her way towards me in the cosy, dimly-lit cafe where I'd escaped to, seeking respite from the searing heat of Desaru Coast's mid-afternoon sun.

A lone *Mat Salleh* sitting discreetly in one corner cradling his cup of coffee, who had hitherto been lost in his well-thumbed book, looks up at the sudden bustle caused by Yana's entrance and the noisy exchange of hugs that ensue.

"Hiiii, thanks for waiting. Just call me Yana!" she exclaims, before proceeding to make herself comfortable next to me on the sofa. "I'm so sorry I'm a little late. I had to sort out a few things with Murray (Murray Aitken, the hotel's general manager) for our Earth Hour event tonight."



Siti Norazliyana Ali, or simply Yana, is Hard Rock Hotel Desaru Coast's sustainability manager.

Of course, I nod understandingly. It's only a matter of hours before the lights go off on Hard Rock Hotel Desaru Coast – and its surrounding areas – plunging the landscape in a cloak of darkness in a nod to Earth Hour, a worldwide movement to unite people to act on climate change and other environmental issues. It was initially mooted by Earth House co-founder Andy Ridley, resulting in a partnership between WWF-Australia, Leo Burnett and Fairfax Media to promote the cause.

The annual event encourages individuals, communities and businesses to give an hour for Earth, marked by landmarks and businesses switching off non-essential lights from 8.30pm to 9.30pm, usually on the last Saturday of March. Yana's involvement underscores the hotel's deep-rooted dedication to environmental sustainability, a core value echoed in its motto, "Save the Planet".

As the sustainability manager, the 36-year-old's main role is to ensure that the hotel operates in a sustainable manner. "I've been here for the last year and a half," Yana tells me, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.



Yana spent 14 years in sea turtle conservation.

Beaming broadly, she shares that she was previously involved in sea turtle conservation for 14 years. "For the first seven years of my career, I was with Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)'s Sea Turtle Research Unit, and then I joined WWF Malaysia," she elaborates.

Continuing, she shares: "Then I came to Desaru Coast and this hotel, one of the things I really like about working here is that I'm given the opportunity to come up with ideas and share them. I like the fact that I can then try to explore these ideas and attempt to realise them – with the full backing of the team here."

OF SIGHT AND SOUND



Irshad Mobarak (left) from Junglewalla Desaru uncovering a unique spider species with the wildlife photographers.

Her excitement is palpable as Yana elaborates on the hotel's latest initiative in partnership with JungleWalla Desaru, aimed at rewilding Desaru Coast and its surrounding forests. The "Amplified Acoustics" project, a fusion of music and sustainability, is poised to make a significant impact on wildlife conservation efforts in the region.

Building upon the foundation of music and sustainability, the focus will be on two crucial conservation efforts: Photography Documentation and Bioacoustics. Yana's eyes under her dark-rimmed glasses light up as she explains the significance of these initiatives in capturing the essence of Desaru Coast's wildlife and ecosystems.

"In an effort to raise awareness about wildlife conservation in Desaru Coast, the hotel has gathered four esteemed local wildlife photographers," she shares, adding: "These photographers will capture the dynamic ecosystem of Desaru Coast, with the aim of identifying wildlife species and documenting their habitats."

It's a formidable band of award-winning nature photographers that have been invited to come on board for this project. They include Peter Ong, a council member on the Jane Goodall Legacy Foundation, Bonnie Yap, ambassador of Canon E05 since 2017, "Rockstar Photographer" Sanjitpaal Singh and award-winning Yusuf Madi, whose recent claim to fame was for his photograph entitled *Kid and Buffalo*, which won the Images of Asia Monthly August 2020 award.

This collaboration marks a pivotal moment for the resort as the country's top wildlife photographers unite for a crucial cause. Additionally, the captivating photographs captured during this initiative will not only be showcased in a dedicated exhibit at the resort, but will also be sent for further research, contributing to the broader understanding and conservation efforts of Desaru Coast's biodiversity.



Yana (kneeling second from left) was a participant in (G.R.I.P.S) Growth-Roundtable of Iskandar Puteri's Sustainability.

Meanwhile, Bioacoustics, another integral aspect of the "Amplified Acoustics" project, will delve deeper into the realm of sound by recording the natural symphony of Desaru Coast's wilderness.

"This innovative approach will offer us a better understanding of the health and dynamics of the ecosystem here. Murray, the general manager, is very enthusiastic for the hotel to lead the charge in this initiative. We believe that we can make a significant difference long-term through the powerful mediums of photography documentation and bioacoustics," enthuses Yana, expression earnest.

Capturing the essence of Desaru Coast's wildlife and ecosystems through photography will not only raise awareness, but also contribute valuable data for research and conservation efforts.

"As we celebrate Earth Hour tonight, we need to remember that our efforts extend far beyond this symbolic gesture," Yana reflects, her voice infused with determination. Adding, the Melaka-born shares: "For us, Earth Hour is essentially a time to reset and re-commit to our ongoing CSR initiatives."

PASSION IGNITED



Yana returning from a diving trip in Pulau Tioman.

As Yana shares her personal journey, her passion for wildlife conservation shines through. "My interest started during my degree years and not actually when I was growing up," she reveals, before adding with a chuckle: "As a youngster, I didn't even dare go into the sea. Not necessarily because I was scared; even my parents would not allow me to venture close to the water's edge."

But it was her time of studying at University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) that ignited her passion for marine conservation. "From someone who was terrified of water, I went on to become a diver!" shares Yana, whose father was an army commando with the special force, and mother was a housewife.

"At the beginning, I knew nothing about the sea," continues Yana, the eldest of four siblings. "I never thought I'd become a marine biologist or even be in the field of conservation. It all changed when I joined UMT. This was where I got my full taste of nature."



Yana going birding with the hotel team for Earth Hour 2023.

Hailing from a small town in Alor Gajah, Melaka, Yana's journey hasn't been without its challenges. Her voice dips when she recounts her experiences of being bullied at school. "I skipped Standard 4 – I jumped from Standard 3 to 5 because I passed the exam at Standard 3," she reveals, adding solemnly: "But that's when all the problems started. I was bullied and it was a struggle for me to learn both the syllabuses for Standard 4 and 5."

Despite the challenges she had to endure, Yana's determination never wavered. Brows furrowing at the recollection, she confides: "When I entered high school, I had 4 As and 1B. I received many offers and was actually eligible to go to boarding school – but I didn't. I was scared I'd be bullied. It was so traumatising. I struggled at primary school so in the end, I just went to a *kampung* high school."

Continuing, Yana, who had a penchant for biology even as a school girl, recalls that at high school, she pushed herself to work harder, knowing that she had something that she wanted to achieve. "During my break times while others played, I'd be reading. I loved biology because I could understand the concept. With Maths, you have to remember the formula. I'm not into remembering formulas! I need to understand the concept and then I'll know what to do with it."

Chuckling, she confides: "It's similar to what happened when I started here with hotel operations. Once I understood the concept, then I knew what to do. In the first three months it was a struggle because I didn't understand it (the concept). But Murray was very patient and reassured me that I could take my time to fully comprehend – and then start planning."

WEIGHT OF WISDOM



Yana (fourth from left) with the Breast Cancer Support Group members.

Asked who's been her source of inspiration in her journey thus far, Yana replies almost instantly: "Always my mum. I still remember when I was only 11. My dad had to be deployed to Bosnia, so my mum assumed the responsibility of becoming both 'mum' and 'dad' to me and my siblings. She was not lucky enough to receive a good education in her younger years, but she still managed to raise us well."

Yana's vision for the future is as inspiring as her journey. "I would like to champion the biodiversity that we have here," she declares, eyes shining with conviction. Turning to me, eyes clouding in dismay, she points out: "It's very hard to see a butterfly these days. Have you seen any lately? We need to bring back the biodiversity."



Sharing the hotel's compost with the Breast Cancer Support Group, JB.

As our conversation draws to a close, I glance at my watch, realising the fleeting nature of our time together. With a gentle nod, I signal to Yana that our discussion must soon come to an end. "Any parting thoughts?" I inquire, lobbing a warm smile to the passionate advocate seated before me.

After a moment of contemplation, Yana eventually replies: "In our efforts, we must strive for solutions that address multiple challenges at once, and we must recognise the power of collaboration. Alone, our impact may be limited, but together, we can achieve many remarkable things."

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