

You make a difference

WILDLIFE MATTERS

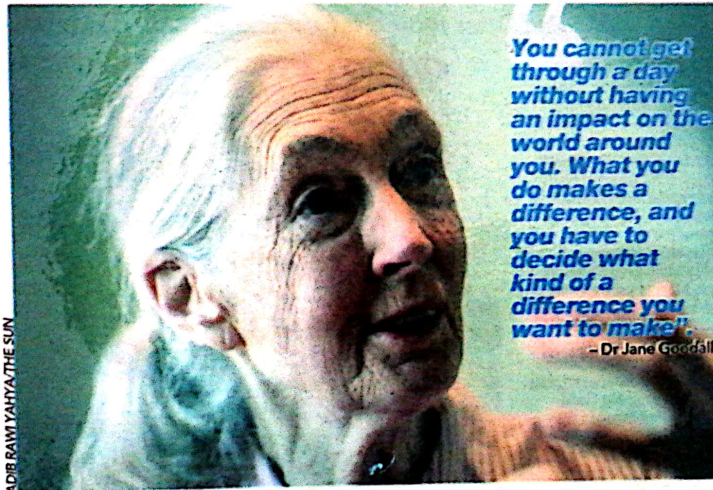
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It isn't every day that an international icon stops over in Kuala Lumpur. Rarer still it is for that appearance to be made by a scientific and environmental conservation icon. Dr Jane Goodall, foremost primatologist, anthropologist, environmental and animal welfare activist and UN Messenger of Peace, delivered her maiden talk to Malaysians entitled "Reasons for Hope" in Kuala Lumpur last week. This was the good doctor's first visit to Malaysia, and her talk was delivered at an event that officially launched the Malaysian chapter of Dr Goodall's global youth programme called Roots & Shoots.

I was privileged enough to attend her talk and it was somewhat surrealistic to finally see this remarkable woman in person. This diminutive woman with her trademark pony tail (now a regal shade of white at the age of 81) entered the auditorium to a thunderous applause and a standing ovation. There really isn't anything new that I can highlight which isn't already known to the world about Goodall's personal and scientific journeys, as well as her activism on environmental and animal welfare issues. Her accomplishments, findings, mission and key messages are well documented and disseminated. So, rather than list the many accolades bestowed upon her over the last half a century, I thought I would make best use of the space in this column to distil several of her key take away messages during the event. It is well worth the reiteration.

She emphasised that all of us have to have to take cognisance of the fact that each and every one of us causes an impact on the planet. I elaborate on this conviction by sharing one of her famous quotes: "You cannot get through a day without having an



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impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of a difference you want to make". This certainly requires reflection and eventually action on our part.

She reminded the audience that the window of opportunity still exists to prevent the destruction of the environment. She did in this instance make specific reference to the destruction of tropical rainforests; certainly a message that hit closer to home, in the wake of the recent devastating floods exacerbated by deforestation. She points to the cruciality of ensuring that communities are integrated into efforts that seek to protect, conserve and manage the environment. Malaysia is slowly making progress in this area, but much more needs to be done to entrench effective mechanisms that best integrate communities into conservation efforts; especially if the aim

is to derive a win-win situation both for the people and the environment. She believes vehemently that it's never too late for anyone to change behaviours that impact the planet; from big corporations to the simple man on the street, and I hope this message resonates deeply with readers. She urges folks not to get too burdened and overwhelmed by "thinking globally" about what ails the environment and the solutions needed to address them, but rather shift focus and efforts towards acting locally first. Even the minutest of action at the local level contributes to the larger picture.

She made reference to the need for compassion in the way we treat other sentient beings and did not fail to highlight (as she does in all her appearances) that chimpanzees, just like humans, are capable of having and exhibiting a range of complex

emotions such as love, tenderness, anger, despair and sadness. A video that demonstrated such clear forms of emotion from a chimpanzee named Wounda that was released into a sanctuary site in Congo after years of rehabilitation, moved many in the audience to tears. It instantly brought to my mind our very own great ape, the orangutan. The complex abilities observed by Goodall in chimpanzees have also been recognised to exist in orangutans.

Very recently, a landmark court ruling was made in Argentina in the case of Sandra, a female 28-year-old captive bred orangutan. Campaigners there sought the release of Sandra, who had spent 20 years of her life in a Buenos Aires zoo, by filing a habeas corpus writ. The court was told that it was unjust to keep restrained and captive an animal that possesses such complex cognitive aptitudes. The court ruled that Sandra be recognised as a "non-human person" with a right to freedom and be released to an animal sanctuary in Brazil to a life of greater emancipation.

This brings me to the plight of Katarina, a female orangutan that has been languishing in isolation in unsatisfactory conditions in a remote zoo in Kuala Lipis, Pahang. Campaigners from the group, Friends of the Orangutan, have even petitioned the prime minister to intervene to order the relocation of Katarina to the Matang Wildlife Sanctuary in Sarawak to live out her life in more conducive and freer conditions. I put forward no legal arguments here to secure Katarina's relocation to the sanctuary; instead, I appeal to the powers that be, to exercise the great human value that is compassion, and do what is necessary to end the lonely and desolate existence of Katarina. Jane Goodall would certainly approve.

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