

PRESS STATEMENT

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2020 as ‘Super Year for Nature:’ Transformative change is no longer just an option

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ACB Executive Director Theresa Mundita Lim says taking care of our environment also means taking care of our health and well-being. Photo by Chen Soon Ling

On the International Day for Biological Diversity (IDB), the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) stands in solidarity with the global community in tackling the environmental challenges that we are facing today. The theme of the observance of the IDB, “Our solutions are in nature,” resonates with our resolve to ensure the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity in the ASEAN region.

This year has been earlier announced as “Super Year for Nature” as the UN Decade on Biodiversity and the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 will come to a close. At the onset, governments across the world were supposed to take stock of their achievements and challenges

in the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and negotiate for a post-2020 global biodiversity framework that lays out the bold plan to halt and reverse biodiversity loss.

But the COVID-19 pandemic has infected five million people and has taken around 300,000 lives worldwide to date. It has caused disruptions and wreaked havoc on industries and economies. Creating somber moods across the world with restrictions on movements in place, the pandemic caused the postponement of international meetings and negotiations, including the Third ASEAN Conference on Biodiversity or ACB 2020, an avenue for the region to consolidate inputs and strengthen the ASEAN position that will feed into the post-2020 framework. Originally scheduled to take place in March 2020 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the new date of its conduct will be announced in due course.

The global public health crisis and the consequential shutdown of borders, however, do not deter our regional solidarity. Information and learning exchange remains vibrant these past months through successful online engagements. The ASEAN Member States, the ASEAN Secretariat, and the ACB continue to conduct meetings, albeit virtually, on the development of a resolution containing common aspirations of the ASEAN on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

Likewise, on 20 May, the ACB, in partnership with ASEAN Secretariat, organised *Biodiversity and Preventing Future Pandemics*, a webinar that engaged participants on the irrefutable connection of biodiversity decline and the rise of zoonoses, diseases transmitted between animals and humans. The webinar was well-received by more than 12,000 viewers so far, including representatives of governments and civil society organisations, researchers, members of the academe, educators, and students from different levels.

The ACB also co-organised another webinar with the Pew Charitable Trusts, which provided a platform for experts to present the science behind the proposed 30 per cent global target of marine protected areas by 2030. The online meeting gathered more around 120 attendees, most of whom are from the ASEAN region. There, the importance of having an ambitious yet achievable global target was discussed, with relevant inputs and questions coming from the online participants. The discussion took into account the realities, challenges, strategies, and opportunities, that influence the directions we take.

Despite the grave threats that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to public health, 2020 remains the "Super Year for Nature and Biodiversity", as we are reminded of how humanity is inextricably linked to our ecosystems, and all its components. Indeed, what has become clearer and more palpable is the fact that human health greatly depends on environmental health.

The ACB supports the ASEAN Member States in striving to elevate biodiversity considerations in the regional and national agenda, and particularly at this time, in the area of public health, as we shift towards the so-called "new normal." We also see stronger synergies with and among local and sub-national governments in rural, peri-urban, and urban areas, as we appreciate their role as our primary policymakers, implementors, and first line of defence. Moreover, through the strong partnerships we forge in the ASEAN, we can demonstrate that if we work together to heal the planet, we can heal as one from the scourge of pandemics.

Biodiversity conservation will not only prevent another outbreak of zoonosis: it also offers hope as a source of cures for various diseases, and provides an answer to food and water security.

Until we recognise that our solutions are in biodiversity, in nature, we can never achieve the transformative change that we need to survive another health crisis.

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