

The ASEAN

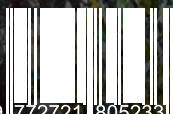


one vision
one identity
one community

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ASEAN'S ROOTS AND REEFS Nature's Strongholds

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THE PHILIPPINES' ASCC CHAIRSHIP

The Rise of a Resilient Region

THE INSIDE VIEW

Strengthening Regional
Action on Nature and
Biodiversity Conservation

CONVERSATIONS

Biodiversity Leaders
and Storytellers

THE ASEAN COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Community is envisioned as a community with enhanced capacity and capabilities to both respond effectively to challenges and to seize opportunities. Established in 2015, it encapsulates ASEAN's resilience and dynamism in a journey spanning more than half a century, and how far and well the ASEAN Member States have come together as one Community.

With the adoption of the ASEAN Charter in 2007, ASEAN has built and strengthened its institutional frameworks to be more effective, efficient, and have better synergy and coordination, paving the way for a rules-based and comprehensive institutional infrastructure in line with the needs of regional integration and Community building. The ASEAN Community is anchored on three mutually supporting pillars: Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural.

POLITICAL- SECURITY COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) is envisioned "to ensure a rules-based and inclusive community in which [the ASEAN] peoples enjoy human rights, fundamental freedoms and social justice, live in a safe and secure environment with enhanced capacity to respond effectively to emerging challenges and in a dynamic region where ASEAN enhances its Centrality in the evolving regional architecture and plays a constructive role globally."

ECONOMIC COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2025 is an aspiration held by the 10 Member States of ASEAN to be, by year 2025, a) a highly integrated and cohesive economy, b) a competitive, innovative and dynamic ASEAN with c) enhanced connectivity and sectoral cooperation, by remaining d) resilient, inclusive, people-oriented and people-centred and becoming a e) global ASEAN.

SOCIO- CULTURAL COMMUNITY

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is dedicated to realising the full potential of ASEAN citizens. At the heart of the ASCC is the commitment to lift the quality of life of ASEAN peoples through cooperative initiatives that are people-oriented and people-centred.

CROSS-SECTORAL INITIATIVES

The Kuala Lumpur Declaration 2015 decided that the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) Work Plan III and the ASEAN Connectivity 2025, adopted in 2016, shall be an integral part of ASEAN Community Vision 2025: Forging Ahead Together. In addition, to implement the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, other cross-sectoral/pillar issues and their coordination should also continuously be enhanced and strengthened.

Sources:

ASEAN Secretariat. (2023). ASEAN Community fact sheet 2023. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/ASEAN-Community-Fact-Sheet-2023-FINAL.pdf>
ASEAN Secretariat. (n.d.). Our communities. ASEAN. <https://asean.org/our-communities/>



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The Inside View

- 6** | The Rise of A Resilient Region: The Philippines' ASCC Chairship and the Path to ASEAN Community Vision 2045

Rex Gatchalian, Secretary of Social Welfare and Development, Philippines and ASCC Council Chair

- 9** | Malaysia at the Forefront: Strengthening Regional Action on Nature and Biodiversity Conservation

Siva Kumar Solay Rajah, Chair of AWGNCB

- 12** | COP30 Outcomes: A Way Forward for ASEAN Cooperation on Climate and Biodiversity through Nature-Based Solutions

Vong Sok, PhD, Natalia Derodofa, and Gregorius Gilang S. Nugroho, Environment Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department

- 15** | Biodiversity: The Living Solution to the Triple Planetary Crisis

Jerome Montemayor, PhD, ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity

- 18** | One ASEAN Sea: Harnessing Regional Collaboration for Our Shared Future

Jerome L. Montemayor, PhD, ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity and Vong Sok, PhD, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department

- 22** | ASEAN Biodiversity: By the Numbers

- 26** | Viet Nam hosts Eighth ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference

- 27** | ASEAN Heritage Parks

- 30** | ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity Initiatives

- 31** | Empowering Communities and Enhancing Biodiversity and Livelihoods Through Small Grants

ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity

- 34** | Business Sector Responds to ASEAN's Biodiversity Challenge

Metro Pacific Investments Corporation

- 37** | The Nature of Health: Linking Biodiversity, Animal Habitat Loss, Human Illnesses and One Health in ASEAN

Jennifer Frances dela Rosa, Health Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department and Mary Kathleen Quiano Castro, The ASEAN

- 38** | One Health Surveillance: Expanding the Lens Beyond Human Cases

Aldilas Achmad Nursetyo, MD, MS, Abdurrahman, MPH, and Abdul Haris Ibrahim, MHI, ASEAN Biological Threats Surveillance Centre

Conversations

- 40** | Women-Led Mapping on Wakatobi's Coast: Megawati, ENMAPS Programme Enumerator

Ixora Tri Devi, The ASEAN

- 42** | Sowing Seeds of Care: Mark Liao, 2019 ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Leader

Ixora Tri Devi, The ASEAN

- 44** | On Dolphins and Coastal Life in the Gulf of Mottama: Thae Eindra Hsu, 2023 Youth Biodiversity Leader

Ixora Tri Devi, The ASEAN

- 46** | Capturing the Threads That Connect Us: Brice Dumas, 2022 ACB Young ASEAN Storyteller

Ixora Tri Devi, The ASEAN

- 48** | Keeping Green from Turning Grey: Gretel Seet, Coordinator, Global Youth Biodiversity Network Southeast Asia

Ixora Tri Devi, The ASEAN

- 50** | Stamping Out Illegal Wildlife Trade: The Philippine Postal Office on the Front Line

Joanne B. Agbisit, The ASEAN

Shifting Currents

- 53** | Embracing Unity in Science: Gifted ASEAN+3 Youths Race Against Climate Change in Siem Reap

Oeurn Savann, GDSTI/MISTI COSTI Cambodia

- 56** | How Scam Ready ASEAN is Helping Communities Respond to Online Fraud

Fatima Alifha, Scam Ready ASEAN

- 59** | ASEAN Entities: A Brief

- 60** | Beyond Borders: How the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship Shapes Futures Through Education and Experience

Maybank Foundation

- 62** | No Consumers Left Behind

Agus Catur Aryanto Putro, GIZ Indonesia and ASEAN and Maulani Rotinsulu, ASEAN Disability Forum

- 65** | Building Trust Across Borders: Lao PDR and Viet Nam Deepen Consumer Protection

Khang Nguyen, UK Mission to Viet Nam

- 68** | 2025 ASEAN Art Residency Programme: "The Little Beetle's Journey"

Ixora Tri Devi, The ASEAN

Bridges

- 70** | Book Feature: The Mango Flavour by Ambassador Gurjit Singh



Scan to
download
this edition



Note from the Editorial Team

ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Council Chair and Philippine Department of Social Welfare and Development Secretary Rex Gatchalian opens this edition with a clear roadmap for the year ahead. Under the theme Navigating Our Future Together, the Philippines' Chairship advances four interlocking priorities: social resilience, inclusive development, innovation, and environmental cooperation. Together, these reflect ASEAN's enduring commitment to both its people and its planet—and Secretary Gatchalian's contribution makes a compelling case that hope and collective progress are not aspirations, but strategies.

The region's environmental diplomacy reached a new milestone at COP 30 in Belém, Brazil, in late 2025. For the first time, the region hosted a dedicated ASEAN Pavilion, signaling its transition from a group of participants to a unified, influential bloc. This collective engagement translated global commitments into concrete action by highlighting the essential nexus between climate change and

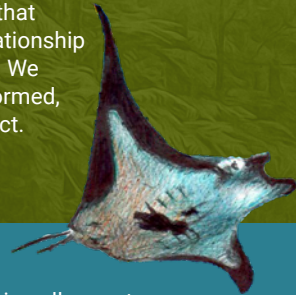
biodiversity. By emphasizing Nature-based Solutions (NbS) as a primary tool, ASEAN is addressing the climate crisis while simultaneously safeguarding ecosystems and advancing the triple bottom line of environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Southeast Asia is one of the planet's most extraordinary repositories of life. Occupying just 3 per cent of the Earth's land surface, the region is home to about 25 per cent of the world's known species—a staggering concentration of biodiversity that carries with it an equally staggering responsibility. In this issue, the Chair of the ASEAN Working Group on Nature Conservation and Biodiversity and Malaysia's Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability Undersecretary Siva Kumar Solay Rajah reflects on ASEAN's journey from the initial vision of 2005 to the mainstreamed regional cooperation of today.

At the heart of that story is the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), which marked its 20th anniversary in 2025. What began as a modest regional

project has evolved into a globally recognised centre of excellence—one that has fundamentally changed how ASEAN understands and values its natural capital. ACB Executive Director Jerome L. Montemayor reflects on two decades of transformation and on the urgent work that lies ahead. As he makes clear, our region sits on the frontlines of the triple planetary crisis: the deeply entangled emergencies of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution. These are not three separate battles. They are one, and the response must match that reality. The ACB's growing focus on marine biodiversity, from the coral reefs of the Coral Triangle to the mangroves and seagrass beds that buffer our coasts, reflects precisely that integrated approach.

This edition is an invitation to explore the roots and reefs, the policies and the people, the setbacks and the hard-fought progress that define our region's relationship with the natural world. We hope it leaves you informed, moved, and ready to act.



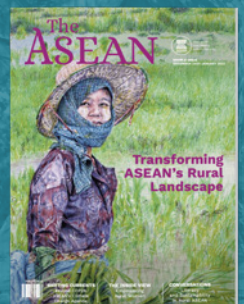
On the Cover

Deborah (Debbie) Tomasowa is a Jakarta-based visual artist known for her striking ballpoint pen portraits. Passionate about drawing people, animals, and everyday objects, she brings extraordinary detail and precision to life using one of the simplest tools—the humble ballpoint pen.

Born and raised in Indonesia, and shaped by her experiences living in the United States, the Philippines, and South Korea, Deborah's work blends her Indonesian heritage with global influences. Her art reflects culture, music, film, and the many worlds she has lived in.

Though briefly trained in college art classes and experienced in watercolour, acrylic, and pencil, the ballpoint pen is her signature medium, where precision is key in capturing incredible details.

With a growing client base across Indonesia, Asia, and the United States, Deborah hopes to expand into Europe. Her artwork has been auctioned to a growing clientele. This is Debbie's third cover for *The ASEAN* magazine.



The ASEAN 2026 Philippines Chairship

“NAVIGATING OUR FUTURE, TOGETHER”

The Philippines assumes the ASEAN Chairship in 2026 at a defining moment for the region. Home to nearly 700 million people and the world's 5th largest economy, ASEAN stands at the crossroads of unprecedented opportunity and evolving global challenges. By 2030, ASEAN is poised to become the 4th largest economy in the world—a powerful testament to the strength of its cooperation, diversity, and shared aspirations.

As Chair, the Philippines embraces this responsibility with resolve and vision. Guided by the theme “Navigating Our Future, Together,” the 2026 Chairship reflects the Philippines’ commitment to leading ASEAN with unity, clarity, and purpose. It is a call to steer our region toward greater resilience, deeper connection, and meaningful change that places our people at the center of progress.

Source: ASEAN 2026 Philippines. (n.d.). ASEAN 2026 Website.
<https://asean2026.gov.ph/>

Photo Credit: © ASEAN Secretariat



Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim hands over the ASEAN Chairship to Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. at the 47th ASEAN Summit and Related Meetings, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 26 October 2025



THE RISE OF A RESILIENT REGION

The Philippines' ASCC Chairship and the Path to ASEAN Community Vision 2045



Rex Gatchalian

*Secretary, Department
of Social Welfare and
Development, Philippines
ASEAN Socio-Cultural
Community (ASCC)
Council Chair*

The Philippines' Chairship of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Pillar unfolds at a decisive inflection point for the region. As the ASCC Blueprint 2025 concludes and the ASCC Strategic Plan enters its implementation phase, the People Pillar faces both a reckoning and an opportunity. Past gains must be defended, institutionalised, and scaled—while unresolved and emerging socio-cultural risks demand bolder, faster, and more coordinated responses. The stakes are clear: the well-being, dignity, and future prospects of more than 700 million ASEAN citizens.



This Chairship rests on a simple but uncompromising premise: ASEAN Community Vision 2045 will succeed only if development is built where life is lived—at the level of individuals, families, and communities—and sustained for generations to come. The ASCC's contribution to ASEAN Community Vision 2045 positions people at the core of development, not at its margins.

Anchored on the ASEAN 2026 theme, "Navigating Our Future, Together," and giving concrete expression to People Empowerment, the Philippines advances the ASCC thematic priorities under the mnemonic *RISE: Resilient and Empowered Families; Inclusive Development; Smart Youth and Innovation; and an Environmentally Sustainable and Food-Secure Future*. RISE signals action and accountability—a test of ASEAN's collective resolve to turn commitments into measurable impact.

Resilient and empowered families: Strengthening the social foundations of the ASEAN Community

Families form the bedrock of ASEAN societies, yet they face unprecedented pressures. Demographic transitions, rapid urbanisation, labour mobility, technological disruption, and climate-related shocks reshape family life across the region. These challenges demand coordinated, holistic, and rights-based regional responses, not fragmented solutions.

The Philippines' Chairship will launch the ASEAN Network for Family Development (AFMD) as a dedicated regional mechanism for knowledge exchange, policy alignment, and capacity building. AFMD will drive cross-sectoral collaborative social protection across health, education, gender equality, and care systems to strengthen families as engines of resilience and inclusive development.

The agenda is deliberately forward-looking. Priority actions include developing a regional action framework on family development with clear strategic pillars and monitoring indicators, establishing a shared knowledge repository on family-centered policies and programmes, and systematically tracking ASEAN Member

States' commitments to advance family-supportive legislation, services, and social protection.

Strengthening families reinforces ASEAN Community Vision 2045's aspiration for a people-centered community. Families shape human capital, transmit values, and provide care across generations. When supported through accessible services, gender-responsive policies, and reliable safety nets, families stabilise societies and accelerate inclusive growth.

Inclusive development: From equity to opportunity

ASEAN Community Vision 2045 and the ASCC Strategic Plan reaffirm that community-building demands constant adaptation. The region must respond to shifting risks, widening inequalities, and populations structurally excluded from development gains.

Inclusive development under the Philippines' Chairship represents a strategy in action. It guarantees access to social services, protection, and opportunity for all, especially those historically left at the margins.

A key priority is advancing age-friendly ecosystems that reflect ASEAN's preference for community- and family-based living. Rather than relying on institutional care, household-level solutions take centre stage: scaling home-care services, retrofitting living environments, and deploying assistive technologies. Interventions support both older persons and family caregivers, who carry the invisible burden of care.

The High-Level Meeting on Unlocking the Silver Economy in ASEAN will convene policymakers, private sector leaders, civil society, and academia to reframe ageing as a strategic opportunity. The meeting will advance regional cooperation frameworks that leverage intergenerational bonds, promote investment in health and care systems, expand lifelong learning, and enable entrepreneurship among older persons. It will also lay the groundwork for a regional action framework on strengthening families and unlocking the silver economy, with clear priorities and partnerships.



Photo Credit: ©The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)

Complementing this is the 2026 ASEAN High-Level Policy Dialogue on Social Protection, designed as a platform for frank, forward-looking exchanges on emerging risks, coverage gaps, and system sustainability. Social protection constitutes critical infrastructure—essential to inclusive growth, economic participation, and social cohesion.

Inclusive development reinforces Vision 2045's commitment to equity, dignity, and leaving no one behind. Informal workers, rural communities, women, persons with disabilities, older persons, and family-based and women-led micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) drive ASEAN's stability and competitiveness. Their inclusion strengthens the region, rather than treating them as peripheral beneficiaries.

Smart youth and innovation: Empowering the next generation of changemakers

The conventional wisdom that youth embody national hope carries new

urgency in the digital era. Connectivity has created opportunities but also exposed young people to online exploitation, disinformation, and mental health risks. ASEAN must safeguard their potential through deliberate investment in digital resilience, equipping youth with critical literacy, ethical grounding, and the capacity to navigate online spaces with discernment and responsibility.

The ASEAN Youth Summit on Digital Resilience will provide a platform for dialogue, co-creation, and regional collaboration. Core themes will include digital literacy, online well-being, youth participation in digital governance, and technology-driven advocacy and innovation.

Beyond skill-building, youth engagement strengthens ASEAN's capacity to adapt, experiment, and lead. Young people are present-day co-creators of the ASEAN trajectory, shaping policy, innovation ecosystems, and regional governance. This approach reinforces ASEAN Community Vision 2045's ambition for an agile, inclusive, and people-driven community.

Environmentally sustainable and food-secure future: Planet and people in balance

Environmental sustainability and food security define the region's survival and prosperity. The Philippines' Chairship elevates this priority in recognition of ASEAN's vulnerability to climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation.

From rising sea levels to disrupted food systems, environmental risks threaten development gains and disproportionately harm vulnerable populations. Integrated approaches will link climate action, sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and resilient food systems to safeguard communities.

Food security represents a social, economic, and human development imperative. It underpins nutrition, health, livelihoods, and societal stability. Growth anchored in ecological stewardship ensures that progress today safeguards the well-being of future generations—a principle central to ASEAN Community Vision 2045.

The Philippines' ASCC Chairship asserts that the realisation of the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 depends on deliberate action today. Alignment between long-term ambition and present-day choices defines success.

RISE priorities cement this approach: resilience at the family level, inclusion transformed into opportunity, innovation guided by ethics, and sustainability rooted in responsibility. These priorities reinforce one another and strengthen the region's capacity to face uncertainty with purpose and confidence. Collectively, they empower ASEAN to shape its future intentionally, not merely survive it.

These initiatives bring the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 to life, transforming the roadmap into a shared and active commitment as the region rises together to build a resilient, inclusive, innovative, and sustainable ASEAN, together, and for generations to come.

MALAYSIA AT THE FOREFRONT Strengthening Regional Action on Nature and Biodiversity Conservation



Siva Kumar Solay Rajah

*Chair of ASEAN Working
Group on Nature Conservation
and Biodiversity*

*Undersecretary, Biodiversity
and Forestry Management
Division, Ministry of Natural
Resources and Environmental
Sustainability Malaysia*

As Sarawak's oldest national park, Malaysia's Bako National Park is a 27.27-square-kilometre coastal reserve that features diverse ecosystems, sandstone cliffs, and charismatic wildlife. It was designated as the 65th ASEAN Heritage Park in 2025, along with five other protected areas in Malaysia and Viet Nam

The ASEAN region, endowed with extraordinary biological richness, stands at a defining moment in its sustainable development journey. Its terrestrial, coastal, and marine ecosystems rank among the most diverse and productive on Earth. These ecosystems underpin food security, sustain livelihoods, anchor cultural heritage, and strengthen climate resilience for more than 700 million people. The ongoing triple planetary crisis, characterised by biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution, poses a growing threat to these vital ecosystems. Tackling this crisis at the regional level requires a whole-of-society approach.

Photo Credit: © Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability Malaysia

The strategies to address this crisis require closer alignment of regional actions—guided by the ASEAN Working Group on Nature Conservation and Biodiversity (AWGNCB) and the ASEAN Biodiversity Plan (ABP)—with global commitments under Sustainable Development Goals and various multilateral environmental agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF). Furthermore, these necessitate the effective implementation of actions at the local level.

Building on achieving several success stories, including the development of the National Policy on Biological Diversity 2022-2030 aligned with the KMGBF, the implementation of an Ecological Fiscal Transfer for Biodiversity Conservation, the employment of community rangers, the implementation of a large-scale ecosystem restoration programme, the development of a globally award-winning clearing-house mechanism, and the establishment of a platform for business and biodiversity, Malaysia is determined to continue its leadership role in advancing regional cooperation on nature and biodiversity conservation.

Malaysia's priorities are to accelerate collective actions towards operationalising regional and global commitments, promote transboundary collaboration, and strengthen resource mobilisation. This mission goes beyond mere diplomacy. It is essential not only for regional inclusivity and sustainability as guided by the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, but also for the country's development trajectory and long-term economic resilience.

Operationalising regional and global commitments

Recognising the benefits of collective action in achieving sustainable development and promoting a clean and green environment, the ASEAN Leaders resolved to intensify cooperation in addressing problems associated with the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. AWGNCB is envisioned as a consultative platform to deepen regional coordination and cooperation in addressing problems associated with natural resources and biodiversity. It is tasked to undertake



concrete actions to protect, conserve, and sustainably manage the region's rich biological diversity.

The ABP seeks to enhance coordination among the ASEAN Member States to address ASEAN community-wide concerns related to biodiversity through region-wide approaches and complement the Member States' efforts in implementing their respective National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans.

In this view, the ABP details the regional targets, strategies, and key actions to be undertaken by ASEAN Member States to achieve significant biodiversity conservation outputs whilst harmonising their efforts to achieve KMGBF. The approach to strengthening regional coordination, improving monitoring and reporting systems, mobilising sustainable financing, and promoting science-based policymaking will enhance the visibility and effectiveness of ASEAN Member States' efforts.

Promoting transboundary collaboration

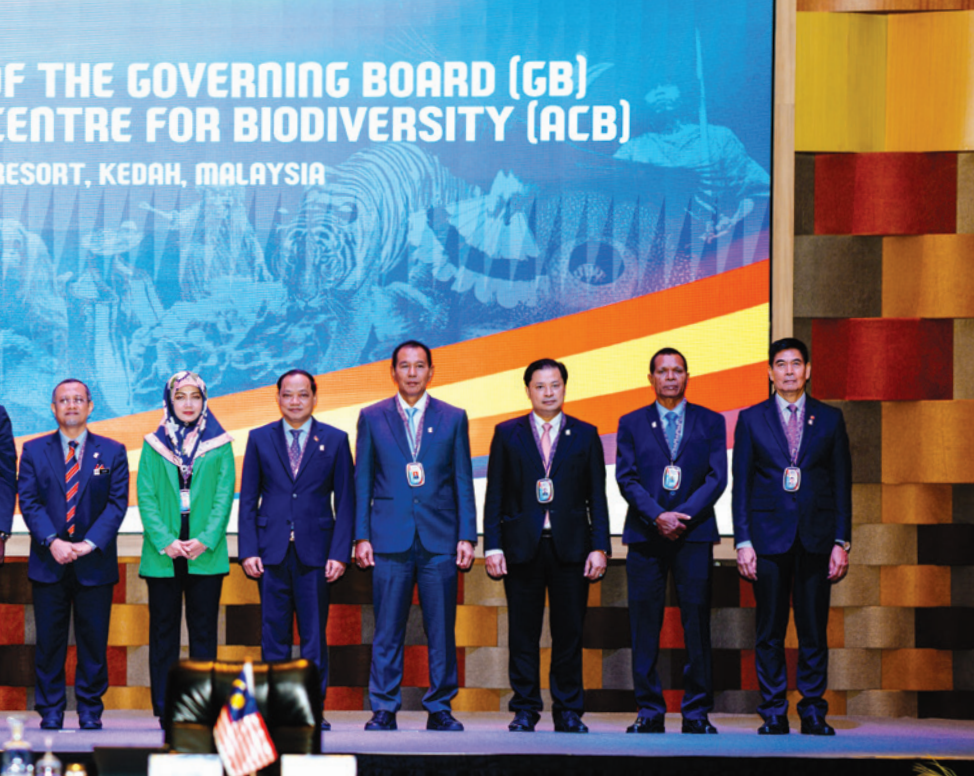
Effective biodiversity management requires transboundary cooperation because our web of life knows no national boundaries. From its majestic mountains to its deepest waters, the ASEAN region continues to lose critically important species

due to anthropogenic factors such as illegal wildlife trade. Evidence shows that transboundary collaboration in combating illegal wildlife trade has resulted in effective enforcement in the region. These collaborative efforts are also important for the conservation of ASEAN's extensive coastlines and marine ecosystems to support the region's emerging Blue Economy. Moving beyond site-based initiatives by weaving ecological corridors creates an interconnected safety net that cradles life, ensures sustainable livelihoods, and guarantees a resilient and shared future.

Mobilising resources

To advance the biodiversity agenda, significant support mechanisms—particularly adequate, predictable, and easily accessible financial resources, capacity-building opportunities, technical and scientific cooperation, and effective technology transfer—must be in place. The recognition of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity as one of the regional and subregional technical and scientific cooperation support centres by the CBD puts it in a strategic position to help ASEAN Member States acquire these resources for the realisation of the regional and global biodiversity frameworks.

Strategic partnerships remain vital to the success of the AWGNCB and the ASEAN Biodiversity Plan. This is evidenced by the European Union's Technical



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Malaysia demonstrated its commitment to biodiversity conservation last year with the addition of three protected areas.

Assistance Facility to the ASEAN Green Team Europe Initiative (TAF-GTEI) initiative, Germany's (KfW) Small Grants Programme, and targeted conservation efforts for wetlands and migratory birds supported by Japan and New Zealand. Furthermore, the United Kingdom's work on peatlands and the Hanns Seidel Foundation's commitment to the ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Programme (AYBP) ensure a comprehensive approach to regional environmental resilience.

Translating vision into action

In close collaboration with the ASEAN Secretariat and the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity during the Eighth ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference in Viet Nam, Malaysia has initiated a roundtable discussion side event to support the ASEAN Member States in implementing National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans, preparing 7th National Reports for the CBD, and developing the ASEAN Joint Statement for the Seventeenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD.

Malaysia demonstrated its commitment to biodiversity conservation last year with the addition of three protected areas: Tengku Hassan Wildlife Reserve, Bako National Park, and Lambir Hills National Park to the regional network of ASEAN Heritage Parks. This inclusion is a significant achievement.

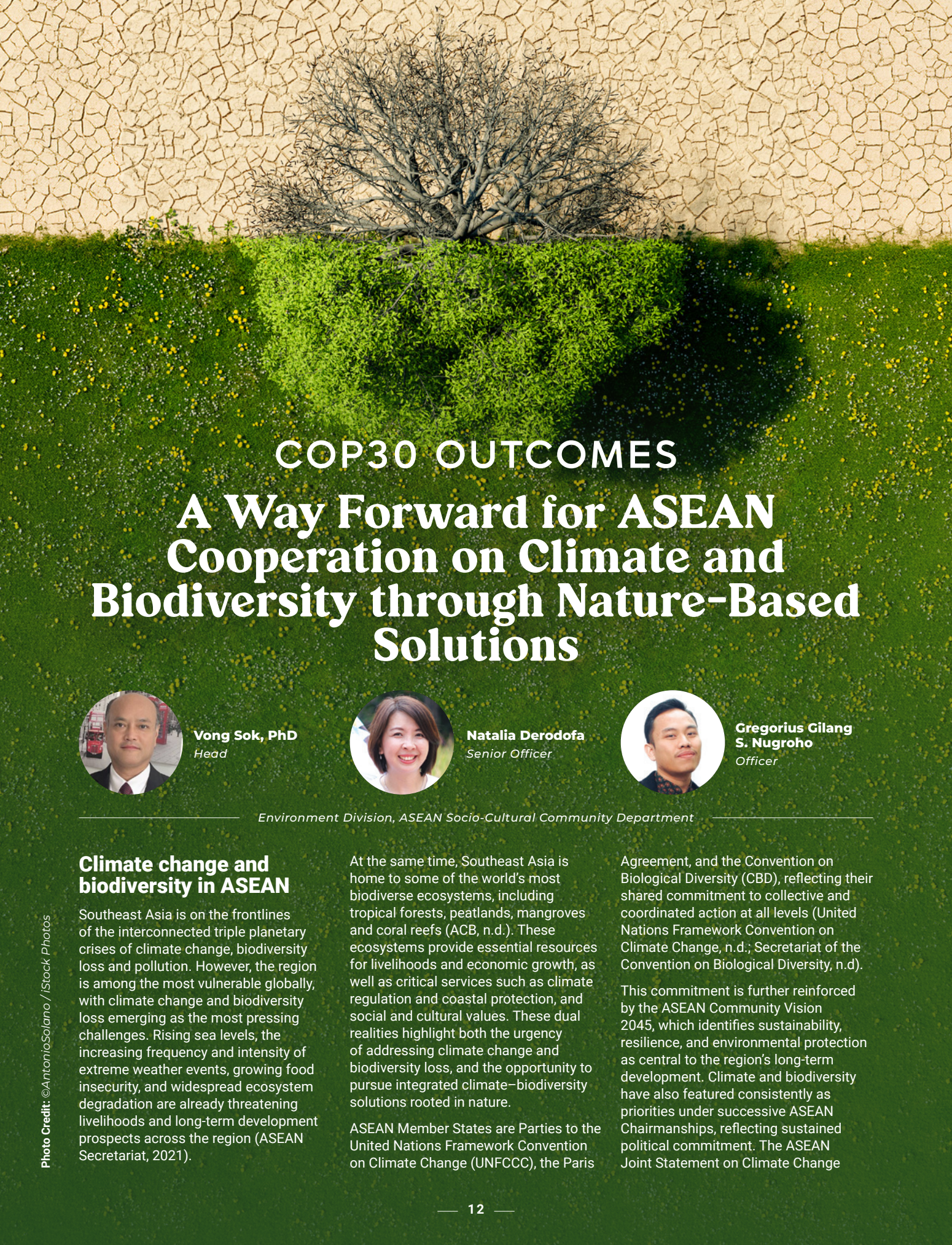
Youth in Malaysia are actively involved in regional conservation advocacy, recognised as capable partners in this effort. The alumni of the AYBP consistently contribute to the programme's regional objectives through groups such as the Global Youth Biodiversity Network Malaysia Chapter and the Sarawak Eco Warriors.

Looking ahead

The path forward will be directed by targets and goals focused on achieving concrete outcomes. These are designed to align with and support relevant ASEAN frameworks, plans, and flagship programmes. Key initiatives include the ASEAN Heritage Parks, the ASEAN Green Initiative, the ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Programme, and the ASEAN Business and Biodiversity Initiative, alongside more specific and relevant cross-sectoral strategies such as the ASEAN Peatland Management Strategy 2023-2030, the One Health Joint Plan of Action 2022-2026, the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework and Implementation Plan, the ASEAN Action Plan on Invasive Alien Species Management, the ASEAN Strategy for Preventing the Transmission of Zoonotic Diseases from Wildlife Trade, the Threatened Species Action Plan for ASEAN, and the ASEAN Work Program on Urban Biodiversity and Greenery.

Collective action by ASEAN Member States is needed across several critical areas: managing protected areas; mainstreaming biodiversity across sectors; accelerating ecosystem restoration; ensuring fair and equitable sharing of benefits from the utilisation of biological resources; enhancing urban biodiversity conservation; managing invasive alien species effectively; promoting communication, education, and public awareness; and implementing knowledge management for biodiversity conservation.

Together, through the AWGNCB platform, chaired by Malaysia from 2026 to 2028, these actions form a comprehensive and coordinated pathway toward maintaining ecosystem services, sustaining a healthy planet, and delivering essential benefits for all people. Malaysia's rallying call for *inclusivity* and *sustainability* during its ASEAN Chairship in 2025 reiterated the need to act as one strong community in protecting and conserving ASEAN's biodiversity. Building on this momentum, the Philippines' ASEAN Chairship in 2026 continues to prioritise sustainable development, ensuring that these regional efforts remain a central pillar of economic vitality and cultural identity.



COP30 OUTCOMES

A Way Forward for ASEAN Cooperation on Climate and Biodiversity through Nature-Based Solutions



Vong Sok, PhD
Head



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Senior Officer



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Climate change and biodiversity in ASEAN

Southeast Asia is on the frontlines of the interconnected triple planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. However, the region is among the most vulnerable globally, with climate change and biodiversity loss emerging as the most pressing challenges. Rising sea levels, the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, growing food insecurity, and widespread ecosystem degradation are already threatening livelihoods and long-term development prospects across the region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

At the same time, Southeast Asia is home to some of the world's most biodiverse ecosystems, including tropical forests, peatlands, mangroves and coral reefs (ACB, n.d.). These ecosystems provide essential resources for livelihoods and economic growth, as well as critical services such as climate regulation and coastal protection, and social and cultural values. These dual realities highlight both the urgency of addressing climate change and biodiversity loss, and the opportunity to pursue integrated climate-biodiversity solutions rooted in nature.

ASEAN Member States are Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Paris

Agreement, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), reflecting their shared commitment to collective and coordinated action at all levels (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, n.d.; Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, n.d.).

This commitment is further reinforced by the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, which identifies sustainability, resilience, and environmental protection as central to the region's long-term development. Climate and biodiversity have also featured consistently as priorities under successive ASEAN Chairmanships, reflecting sustained political commitment. The ASEAN Joint Statement on Climate Change

to the UNFCCC COPs and ASEAN Joint Statement on Biodiversity to the CBD COPs, for example, are regularly adopted at the ASEAN Leaders' level and delivered by ASEAN Chairs in respective global fora, demonstrating ASEAN's continued efforts to translate global commitments into concrete collective action. Both commitments highlighted the important nexus between climate change and biodiversity, emphasising the role of Nature-based Solutions (NbS) as integral to addressing climate change while simultaneously safeguarding biodiversity and advancing the broader triple bottom line of environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

The latest ASEAN Joint Statement on Climate Change to COP30, adopted in 2025, particularly emphasises the need to prioritise nature-based and ecosystem-based approaches and inclusive solutions to ensure effective and equitable climate action rooted in the region's natural and cultural heritage. The Joint Statement also calls for integrating nature-based and community-led ecosystem approaches into national climate instruments, such as National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and Long-Term Low Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDS). In doing so, ASEAN is well positioned to demonstrate how NbS can operationalise global commitments under the UNFCCC and the CBD in ways that are context-specific and regionally relevant.

Key COP30 outcomes and ASEAN Pavilion highlights NbS

Building on this regional context, the 30th session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30) held from 10 to 21 November 2025 in Belém, Brazil, presented a timely opportunity for ASEAN to translate global policy commitments into concrete regional action and strengthen engagement with stakeholders to advance NbS in line with ASEAN priorities on climate change and biodiversity.

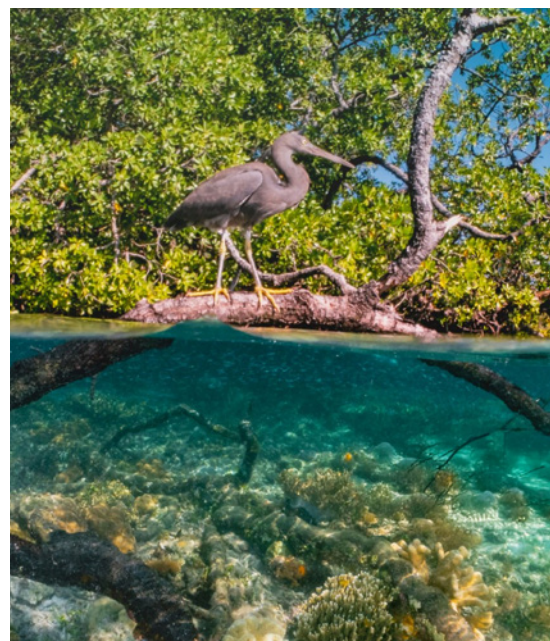
The growing prominence of NbS was reflected across COP30 discussions and prominently showcased through the ASEAN Pavilion, organised for the

first time alongside national pavilions of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Structured around thematic daily programmes, the Pavilion demonstrated ASEAN's commitment to multilateral climate action, including scaling up NbS, enhancing climate finance, mobilising private-sector participation, and supporting just-transition approaches.

During the thematic day on "Nature and People: Forests, Oceans, and Biodiversity," sessions highlighted that effective implementation must be people-centred, responding not only to climate and biodiversity objectives but also to local socio-economic realities. Community stewardship, indigenous knowledge, and equitable benefit-sharing were recognised as essential to ensure NbS support sustainable livelihoods, cultural continuity, and long-term resilience. Experiences in forest and peatland management, agroforestry, and blue carbon initiatives highlighted the importance of community ownership and smallholder participation. At the same time, cultural practices and local narratives were acknowledged as important drivers of climate awareness and social cohesion. ASEAN knowledge products were also presented, including the ASEAN loss and damage study and regional guidelines supporting NbS and ecosystem-based adaptation through sustainable forest management and social forestry.

NbS perspectives also emerged across broader thematic discussions. Adaptation sessions emphasised integrating nature-based and community-based approaches into infrastructure planning and National Adaptation Plans. Food systems discussions highlighted agroforestry and ecosystem-based agricultural practices for resilience and food security, while carbon market dialogues identified forests, peatlands, mangroves, and other blue carbon ecosystems as high-integrity NbS supporting Article 6 cooperation. Discussions on loss and damage further recognised the role of healthy ecosystems in reducing climate risks and addressing both economic and non-economic losses.

A consistent message across sessions was that scaling NbS depends on accessible and well-structured finance. High-integrity carbon markets, including regional initiatives such as



the ASEAN Common Carbon Framework and Article 6 cooperation, were highlighted as mechanisms to mobilise investment. Ecosystems such as forests, peatlands, mangroves, and seagrass were increasingly viewed as bankable NbS assets when supported by clear legal frameworks, strong safeguards, transparent benefit-sharing, and robust Measurement, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) systems, alongside strengthened regional cooperation on data and institutional readiness.

Discussions among ASEAN and partners identified priority actions, including strengthening ecosystem-based adaptation and biodiversity conservation, scaling up investment for blue carbon and peatland and coastal ecosystem management, improving science-policy-finance integration and data systems, promoting inclusive participation of local communities and Indigenous Peoples, and expanding partnerships with development partners, the private sector, and research institutions to support implementation at national and regional levels.

Integrating NbS into ASEAN's broader climate, biodiversity, and development agenda

The momentum from COP30 enables ASEAN to further integrate climate, biodiversity, and development actions

Photo Credit: ©Wan Yong Chong / iStock Photos



through NbS. NbS offer a practical pathway to advance the ASEAN Community Vision 2045 by linking sustainability, resilience, and inclusive growth, while strengthening coherence across key regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Biodiversity Plan (ABP), the forthcoming ASEAN Climate Change Strategic Action Plan (ACCSAP), and the Post-2025 ASEAN Strategic Plan on Environment (ASPEN).

From a biodiversity perspective, priority actions from ABP include restoring degraded terrestrial and marine ecosystems; strengthening protected areas such as ASEAN Heritage Parks and biodiversity corridors; mainstreaming NbS across sectors including agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and urban development; expanding urban green spaces; and integrating natural capital and ecosystem services into planning and financing decisions.

From a climate perspective, ACCSAP presents further opportunities to embed NbS into adaptation and mitigation efforts. This includes promoting high-integrity and inclusive NbS approaches, strengthening regional cooperation on data and monitoring systems, and creating enabling conditions to mobilise public and private finance, including through Article 6 cooperation and emerging regional carbon market initiatives.

In this context, ASPEN can serve as an overarching framework to align climate and biodiversity actions, ensuring a coherent and implementation-focused approach to scaling up NbS across ASEAN.

The way forward: Strengthening ASEAN cooperation on NbS beyond COP30

Building on the outcomes of COP30, ASEAN has a clear opportunity to consolidate NbS into a coherent regional cooperation agenda. First, ASEAN can strengthen partnerships to scale up NbS through existing ASEAN-led mechanisms and platforms, including the ASEAN Working Group on Climate Change and related environmental cooperation platforms. These serve as key entry points to operationalise NbS and Ecosystem-based Adaptation (EbA) guidelines at national and sub-national levels. Continued engagement with dialogue and development partners, regional organisations, research institutions, and the private sector will be essential to translate these guidelines into practical implementation, while sustaining the ASEAN Pavilion as a platform for collaboration, visibility, and knowledge exchange beyond COP30.

Second, scaling up NbS will require stronger mobilisation of public, private, and blended finance. Ongoing initiatives such as the Technical Assistance Facility to the Green Team Europe Initiative (TAF-GTEI), the ASEAN–EU–Germany Climate Action Programme (CAP), and the ASEAN-UK Green Transition Fund (GTF) provide a strong foundation to support capacity-building, pilot implementation, and the development of bankable NbS project pipelines. Greater emphasis should be placed on mobilising investment through high-integrity carbon markets, sustainable finance mechanisms, and partnerships with

financial institutions, while ensuring strong social and environmental safeguards and transparent benefit-sharing. Particular attention should be given to financing community-led and locally driven NbS initiatives, recognising the central role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in delivering sustainable outcomes.

Third, ASEAN can reinforce its regional leadership by preparing coordinated NbS-focused deliverables for upcoming global platforms, including the CBD COP17 and UNFCCC COP31. This includes coordinated preparation of ASEAN Joint Statements, showcasing regional NbS experiences and knowledge products, and continuing the ASEAN Pavilion as a strategic platform to demonstrate ASEAN's integrated approach to climate and biodiversity action. Progress on key regional frameworks, including the ACCSAP and the ASPEN, will provide important milestones to communicate ASEAN's collective ambition and progress in implementation.

Finally, strengthening information-based development will be critical to enhance the credibility, comparability, and scalability of NbS across ASEAN. Priority actions include improving regional data systems, MRV methodologies, and knowledge-sharing platforms to support evidence-based policymaking and investment decisions. Expanding research collaboration, technical exchanges, and capacity-building initiatives will support ASEAN Member States in developing high-integrity NbS approaches and strengthening institutional readiness, bridging gaps between science, policy, and implementation.

By strengthening coherence across partnerships, finance, global engagement, and knowledge systems, ASEAN can position itself as a regional leader in advancing integrated climate and biodiversity action through NbS beyond COP30. Sustained collaboration among the ASEAN Member States, ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN centres/entities, and partners will be essential to maintain momentum and translate commitments into measurable outcomes, including through leadership of and close coordination with the Philippines as the 2026 ASEAN Chair for the upcoming COP31.



References may be downloaded from the following link: https://bit.ly/Issues49-50_Ref



BIODIVERSITY

The Living Solution to the Triple Planetary Crisis

With a population of over 700 million and one of the world's fastest-growing economies, the ASEAN region is undeniably a rising powerhouse. Unfortunately, few realise that this progress is built on the region's extraordinary biodiversity and the ecosystem services it provides—resources that are currently threatened by the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution.



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Southeast Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change. In addition to being geographically located between tectonic plates that cause earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis, the region is also between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, making typhoons the most prevalent hazard in the region. These natural calamities have caused significant economic and human losses that continue to have lingering effects in different aspects of society. These are often exacerbated by unfavourable political climates and poor governance, resulting in poor health and well-

being, loss of property and livelihoods, and, worst of all, human lives. From 2012 to 2022, around 4,400 disaster events were recorded in Southeast Asia, impacting around 128.5 million people and incurring economic losses estimated at 4.2 billion US dollars (AHA Centre, 2023, as cited by ADB, 2023). As climate change intensifies, these natural disasters become more frequent and destructive, leaving the heaviest burdens and consequences to people living in poverty. Sectors and industries that rely on nature and biodiversity, such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and food production, also bear significant socio-economic consequences of severe

disaster impacts which further threaten food security, health, and well-being (Andersen, 2020).

While mainstream media reports on the occurrence of natural phenomena often focus on the impacts on humans and the economy, it is also crucial to recognise the effects of these disasters on our environment and biodiversity. While society suffers economic losses, our ecosystems also lose vital services and biodiversity. These damages to the ecosystem are a major driver of disaster risk (Walz et al., 2021), further increasing the vulnerability of the communities that depend on natural resources for living.



As of November 2025, ASEAN countries have experienced 46 disaster events, including floods, landslides, storms, and wind-related incidents, affecting Indonesia, Viet Nam, and Thailand, while medium to high 7-day average rainfall was experienced by Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam (Relief Web, 2025). Earthquakes have also struck and significantly affected the Philippines and Indonesia this 2025. The Philippines, especially, has suffered from the back-to-back impacts of destructive earthquakes, which affected 370,000 people and displaced 77,000 in Cebu, the country's second-largest city. Powerful tropical cyclones and intense flooding also battered the Philippines, which affected 4 million people across 16 regions in the past two months (Relief Web, 2025).

Solid waste worsens pollution, increases greenhouse gas emissions, and increases the probability of spreading diseases. Poor urban solid waste management is a major driver of severe flooding. According to the *Sixth ASEAN State of the Environment Report* (2021), it is expected that the ASEAN region's solid waste will increase by 188 million tons per year by 2030. Unsustainably managed chemical wastes mostly from 15,000 factories at a minimum, also pose challenges for most of the ASEAN Member States. Aside from solid waste pollution, the region's greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, worsening air quality as climate change intensifies due to non-renewable energy use,

industrialisation, deforestation, and improper waste management.

With half of ASEAN's population projected to live in cities and megacities by 2050, waste management, traffic decongestion, and air pollution control must receive sufficient attention through sound, science-based policies, action plans, and the effective execution of programmes.

A treasure trove of natural wealth

Despite occupying only over 3 per cent of the planet's surface, the ASEAN region houses over 25 per cent of the world's described species. It also has 3 of the 17 megadiverse countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The region's diverse flora and fauna and its vast ecosystems, offer more than just rich cultural heritage and livelihood opportunities. These ecosystems provide us with layers of protection from the harmful impacts of disasters and climate change—as long as we protect them too against deforestation, pollution, land-use change, and destructive, illegal human activities.

Forty-seven per cent of ASEAN's total land area is covered by forests (over 200M ha as of 2020), supporting over 70 million people (Goldman & Hooijmans, 2024). Moreover, ASEAN has 15 per cent of the world's tropical forests, with at least 12 forest types (ACB, 2023), and 19 per cent of the region's total forest cover is still intact, spanning approximately 38.3 hectares (Estoque et

al., 2019). These forests and mountains act as natural carbon sinks, helping regulate temperatures, absorb carbon dioxide, and mitigate the effects of climate change and global warming. Moreover, the region hosts 27 to 41 per cent of the world's tropical peatlands, covering approximately 25 to 30 million hectares (Poulter et al., 2021). These rich ecosystems serve as a powerful natural resource, capable of storing more carbon than all the world's forests combined. Our peatlands are also a significant source of water for plants and animal species and communities.

The region contains nearly 34 per cent (nearly 100,000 km²) of the world's total coral reefs and is the global centre of biodiversity for coral reef fish, molluscs, and crustaceans (ACB, 2023). Aside from the rich resources of the coastal and marine areas that support the livelihood, transportation, and trade of large populations of ASEAN, these ecosystems also protect us from devastating storm surges, intense flooding, and soil erosion. They also help mitigate the impacts of climate change through carbon sequestration.

Despite the valuable economic contributions and ecosystem services provided by our natural resources, many people may still be unaware of their significance, policies may still be insufficiently encompassing to enable transformations, and actions may be less participative than they should be when it comes to the conservation and protection of our nature and biodiversity.

ASEAN's natural shield

Humanity has been exacerbating climate change by disrupting the balance of atmospheric carbon, resulting in drastic temperature shifts, rising sea levels, and the detrimental impacts of extreme weather. Humans alone cannot solve the climate crisis; forests, wetlands, and protected areas, their silent powerhouse allies, do most of the hard work.

These unsung everyday heroes are the reason why the ASEAN Member States established the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB). As the region's response to biodiversity loss, the ACB facilitates cooperation and coordination among governments and with regional and international organisations on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and the fair and

equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of such natural treasures.

In the face of the alarming threats posed by the triple planetary crisis, the ACB and the ASEAN Secretariat supported the ASEAN Member States in developing the Biodiversity Plan, the region's strategy and direction towards the goal of living in harmony with nature by 2050. This plan aligns with the 23 targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM GBF) and synergises with the member states' biodiversity action plans.

One of the ACB's flagship programmes is the growing network of ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHPs). There are currently 69 declared exemplary protected areas in the region. Two of the AHPs, which are also part of the ASEAN Flyway Network (AFN)—Agusan Marsh Wildlife Sanctuary in the Philippines and Bang Pu Nature Education Centre in Thailand—are now acknowledged as part of seven new important wetland sites for conservation. The sites were recognised during the 12th Meeting of Partners (MOP12) of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway Partnership (EAAFP) in Cebu, Philippines, from 8 to 14 November 2025. The Secretariat of both the AHP Programme and the AFN (the ACB) is now an Intergovernmental Partner of the EAAFP, putting it in a more strategic position to amplify its initiatives in the ASEAN flyway, which is at the heart of the EAAF migration route for around 50 million migratory waterbirds annually.

The ACB held the Eighth AHP Conference (AHP8) in Viet Nam from 2 to 5 December 2025. The Conference highlighted ASEAN's progress and contribution to the realisation of the ASEAN Biodiversity Plan. A special AHP8 exhibition will also be launched to promote awareness of the importance of our biodiversity and showcase each of AHP's unique and rich ecosystems. As the AHP Programme secretariat, the ACB conducts capacity development activities for AHP managers and staff; organises AHP conferences; holds promotional activities for the AHP Programme; and facilitates coordination among AHP managers to strengthen the parks as a regional network of protected areas.

The ACB participated in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's (UNFCCC) 30th Conference of the Parties (COP 30) to

provide support to the ASEAN Member States in developing their positions and contributions to stabilising greenhouse gas emissions, which are crucial to mitigating and adapting to climate change. Moreover, the ACB will promote its regional initiatives by highlighting the role of protected and conserved areas in showcasing solutions rooted in diversity and inclusivity to address the triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, climate change, and pollution. The ACB also continues to support the ASEAN Member States in achieving their biodiversity targets and works with international partners, local communities, and development sectors in mainstreaming biodiversity considerations into policies and processes, designing communication, education, and public awareness campaigns, and fostering a whole-of-society approach in all its initiatives.

Navigating towards our shared future

This year, the theme of the ASEAN Chairship of the Philippines, ACB's host country, Navigating Our Future, Together, is a testament to ASEAN's unity, clarity, and purpose in navigating the ASEAN region towards peace, stability, and inclusive growth—ASEAN's founding values. The strategic pillars of the Philippine Chairship also emphasise the importance of transformative, inclusive, and empowering change that protects vulnerable groups, promotes shared values and identities, and strengthens cooperation, all of which are vital to sustainable development. As part of this,

the ACB will recognise the second batch of the ASEAN Green Initiative (AGI). It is ASEAN's initiative encouraging the ASEAN Member States to plant at least 10 million native trees in 10 years. The AGI is a demonstration of ASEAN's commitment to the conservation of the region's rich biodiversity, which is the source of ecosystem services that are vital to our survival. Collectively, these recipients have planted more than 1.4 million native trees in their respective areas.

The impacts of disasters are intensified by pollution and climate change; if we do not act now, the devastation will be significantly worse and may become irreversible. This is why the ACB is facilitating collective action among various stakeholders to ensure that policies and programmes are formed and implemented from the ground up, with the participation of communities whose lives depend on natural resources and on people who protect the natural heritage, as they also rely on them for survival and protection.

As we navigate through the challenges of the triple planetary crisis, may we be reminded that more than building resilience to adapt to the harsh impacts of disasters, there is a greater need to lay out and strengthen the foundations of good governance that foster cooperation, promote science-based policy development, and prioritise the protection and conservation of our biodiversity.



References may be downloaded from the following link: https://bit.ly/Issues49-50_Ref



Photo Credit: ©Fahreza Ahmad

The Philippines' Tubbataha National Park is teeming with rich coral reefs and diverse fish species, showcasing the ecological wealth of the ASEAN region

ONE ASEAN SEA

Harnessing Regional Collaboration for Our Shared Future



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Southeast Asia is a unique underwater paradise. Lying between two of the world's largest oceans—the Pacific Ocean in the east and the Indian Ocean in the west—this vast body of water surrounding the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is considered a global marine powerhouse that provides crucial benefits for the people and the planet.

The Southeast Asian waters consist of the China Sea, the Java Sea, the Sulu Sea, the Philippine Waters, the Celebes Sea, the Banda Sea, the Flores Sea, the Arafura Sea, the Timor Sea, and the Andaman Sea. The whole region covers 8.94 million square kilometres, which is 2.5 per cent of the total surface of all oceans (Wyrski, 1961). The total region has a total coastline of 173,000 km (www.environment.asean.org/). The South China Sea, bordered by the ASEAN Member States and China, separates ASEAN from the vast Pacific Ocean, while the Andaman Sea links Thailand and Myanmar to the Indian Ocean (www.asean.org).

ASEAN is home to 23 of the world's seagrass species, 35 per cent of the world's coral reefs, more than 600 species of hard corals, and 1,300 reef-associated fish species (ACB, 2023). The so-called "Amazon of the Seas" or the Coral Triangle—the global epicentre of marine biodiversity is found in the ASEAN waters. It is a 5.7-6 million square kilometre marine region covering Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, and Timor-Leste. It is home to 76 per cent of the world's 798 coral species and 37 per cent of the world's 6,000 coral reef fish species. These coastal and marine habitats sustain the livelihoods of about 700 million people in ASEAN through fisheries, ecotourism, and other ocean-based economic activities.

Healthy ecosystems, healthy economy

These vital ecosystems provide important and diverse products and services for ecological, economic, and social benefits, including nature-based solutions that benefit climate mitigation and disaster risk reduction, as they serve as natural buffers that enhance the resilience of communities and ecosystems to climate-related impacts. Mangroves and seagrasses, often called blue carbon sinks, for instance, can store up to 10 times more carbon than forests. In addition, they reduce the height of storm surges and prevent erosion and flash flooding in coastal cities. It is estimated that the total potential sustainable annual economic net benefits per square kilometre of healthy coral reefs in ASEAN range from 23,100 to 270,000 US dollars arising from fisheries, shoreline protection, tourism, recreation, and aesthetic values (ACB, 2023).

The mounting pressures

However, increasing pressures from overexploitation, pollution, habitat fragmentation, and climate change are causing severe declines in coastal and marine biodiversity and threatening the socio-economic stability of coastal populations.

Moreover, coastal and marine waters in the region are increasingly affected by shipping, offshore oil and gas activities, pipelines and cables, sand mining, wastewater disposal, tourism resort development, and potentially seabed mining, with cumulative impacts on marine biodiversity and water quality (www.asean.org). Even the Coral Triangle, with its abundance of coral reefs and fish species, faces threats from harmful practices such as illegal fishing and coral mining for construction, and from increased coral bleaching due to climate change. It is estimated that the economic value of coastal and marine ecosystem services at risk from poor management in ASEAN ranges from 62,400 US dollars per square kilometre per year for coastal protection and fisheries to 23,100-270,000 US dollars per square kilometre per year for fisheries, coastal protection, tourism, and recreation. Further, the worsening climate is projected to have major impacts on the region's extensive shorelines and coastal waters, as the estimated sea level rise of 1 metre by 2100 would affect 410 million people, with 59 per cent in tropical Asia. Effects of sea level rise will be exacerbated by land subsidence, which can exceed 25 millimetres per year in coastal cities like Jakarta (www.asean.org).

Reducing negative impacts to coastal and marine ecosystems and safeguarding international waters lie at the core of various transboundary frameworks and agreements, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM GBF) of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. One of the targets of the KM GBF is to protect 30 per cent of the world's coastal and marine areas by 2030, as indicated in its Target 3. This is also well reflected in the region's very own ASEAN Biodiversity Plan that takes into consideration the unique cultural context of the ASEAN Member States. This also includes the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, or the so-called "Constitution for the Oceans," the Ramsar Convention

on Wetlands, which promotes the conservation and wise use of ecosystems; and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement, which address climate-related threats to coastal ecosystems such as acidification and sea level rise.

While global biodiversity frameworks underscore the need to protect and restore coastal and marine ecosystems, addressing the key pressures on them remains equally critical. Recognising marine plastic pollution as one of the major and growing threats to marine biodiversity and ecosystem health, ASEAN has strengthened regional cooperation through a set of complementary policy frameworks and implementation mechanisms. The ASEAN Regional Action Plan on Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Member States (2021–2025), developed as a follow-up to the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in ASEAN, serves as the primary roadmap, guiding coordinated action on land-based and sea-based sources of marine debris, innovation, public awareness, and regional collaboration. Complementing these initiatives, the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework for AEC, which is geared towards resource efficiency, economic resilience, and sustainable growth, and the ASEAN Declaration on Plastic Circularity promote upstream solutions by advancing sustainable production, consumption, and waste management practices, underscoring ASEAN's commitment to addressing plastic pollution across the full life cycle while safeguarding marine biodiversity.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework further promote maritime cooperation, sustainable blue economy development, and biodiversity protection across borders. At the global level, the recent entry into force of the Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement), or the High Seas Treaty, enables new avenues for the establishment of marine protected areas (MPAs) on the high seas and for strengthening environmental safeguarding frameworks.

From isolated to integrated efforts

Increasingly, ASEAN cooperation is extending beyond coastal zones to offshore and deep-sea ecosystems, recognising their ecological linkages with nearshore habitats and their relevance to emerging global

processes. Regional dialogues and science-based initiatives are helping to lay the groundwork for improved understanding of deep-sea biodiversity, migratory species, and connectivity across national boundaries, while supporting ASEAN Member States in engaging with new global instruments such as the BBNJ Agreement in a coordinated and informed manner.

Across the ASEAN region, there has been a growing recognition that marine biodiversity conservation must move beyond isolated site-based interventions toward connected, ecosystem-scale approaches. Integrated coastal zoning planning and management must be given high priority, which integrates climate change adaptation and mitigation. The region must likewise develop a common strategy for handling decommissioning of offshore oil and gas facilities, as well as improved environmental management of undersea pipelines and cables. Expansion of protected areas, such as ASEAN Heritage Parks, must be considered as one of the major efforts to protect coastal and marine assets and livelihoods.

To date, progress includes the expansion and strengthening of marine protected areas, increasing adoption of ecosystem-based management, and enhanced regional cooperation in addressing shared marine challenges such as overfishing, habitat fragmentation, climate change, and pollution.

The historic High Seas Treaty, more formally known as the Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement), entered into force on 17 January 2026. This is a game-changer for a region like Southeast Asia, which heavily relies on the ocean, in the conservation and safeguarding of marine ecosystems beyond national waters. It will not only help protect the vast array of fish species and marine life but also ensure the fair sharing of marine genetic resources, promote technology transfer, and support capacity building, thereby boosting local expertise through international cooperation. The BBNJ Agreement will also provide the legal framework for the ASEAN Member States to assess projects such as deep-sea mining and their potential impacts on local ecosystems.

Notably, conservation efforts are increasingly informed by science-based

planning tools, including ecological connectivity analyses, fisheries stock assessments, and vulnerability studies. These approaches are enabling the ASEAN Member States to better align conservation objectives with fisheries sustainability, climate adaptation, and coastal development priorities. At the same time, there is greater emphasis on inclusive governance, engaging indigenous peoples, local communities, women, and youth as key stewards of marine resources rather than passive beneficiaries. This shift reflects a broader transition toward nature-based solutions (NbS) that protect and restore ecosystems while delivering tangible socio-economic benefits, particularly in climate-vulnerable coastal and island communities.

Nature-based solutions for marine and coastal protection

Simply called “NbS” in the conservation sector, nature-based solutions are emerging as a cornerstone of ASEAN’s response to climate change and biodiversity loss in marine and coastal environments, offering a multitude of ecosystem benefits. Healthy coral reefs, plankton and deep water plants and species, mangroves, seagrass meadows, and coastal wetlands function as natural infrastructure, reducing wave energy, mitigating storm surges, stabilising shorelines, and sequestering carbon. These ecosystems also underpin food security, and are very diverse resource poles, making them essential to resilient coastal economies.

In the ASEAN context—where millions depend directly on coastal and marine resources—NbS offer a cost-effective and socially inclusive pathway to climate adaptation and any future risks. When integrated into coastal and marine spatial planning, NbS can reduce long-term disaster risks most cost-effectively, while sustaining livelihoods and preserving cultural and traditional practices linked to the sea. Importantly, successful NbS implementation depends on strong local governance, secure tenure and use rights, and the integration of traditional ecological knowledge with modern science. Another major potential and diverse NbS have not been adequately studied across various offshore, high-seas, and deep-sea ecosystems, as well as under BBNJ, in the ASEAN region.



The project focuses on four Large Marine Ecosystems:



The Bay of Bengal



Sulu-Celebes Sea

11 pilot sites where the project is being implemented:



INDONESIA



Kepulauan Togean National Park



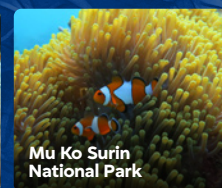
Wakatobi National Park



THAILAND



Mu Ko Similan National Park



Mu Ko Surin National Park



Tarutao National Park



Ranong Biosphere Reserve

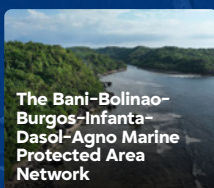


Participatory workshops were conducted by the ASEAN ENMAPS project in coordination with the government, fisherfolk, elders, women, and youth to gather information on the status and issues of the coastal environment in Indonesia's Wakatobi Islands


South China
Sea


Indonesian
Seas

 PHILIPPINES



ASEAN looking ahead

In all of these, ASEAN's priorities will be to strengthen efforts in its flagship programme, most notably the ASEAN Heritage Parks, specifically in expanding the region's marine protected areas, including transboundary MPAs. It is also a priority to promote and mainstream nature-based solutions across all sectors and initiatives for marine and coastal ecosystem conservation. It will be treated as essential infrastructure that will serve as an integrated solution to the triple planetary crisis and, at the same time, will engage local communities and Indigenous Peoples as co-planners in any development endeavours. Lastly, ASEAN should strengthen research and capacity-building among relevant stakeholders to enhance the sharing and use of data on coastal and marine biodiversity, accompanied by efforts to integrate nature-based solutions, deepen knowledge of deep-sea biodiversity, support the establishment of MPAs on the high seas, and enforce environmental safeguarding frameworks and policies. By leveraging international cooperation with the ASEAN Member States and their partners, these actions can collectively advance a shared future in harmony with nature.

Weaving a new tide of marine protection

In 2024, the ASEAN through the ACB launched a five-year project called, Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN region (ASEAN ENMAPS) to improve MPA network management in key Large Marine Ecosystems (LMEs) across Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. It is being implemented by the UN Development Programme through the funding of the Global Environment Facility, with the ACB as the executing agency.

This initiative blends cutting-edge science, including hydrodynamic modelling, fisheries ecology, and vulnerability assessments, to identify the "highways" of marine life that cross national borders. By mapping these biological corridors, managers can protect not just isolated habitats but the whole tapestry of ecosystem services that sustain coastal communities. The

project likewise prioritises knowledge-sharing, communication, education, and public awareness to ensure that the project's gains are sustained and shared among its stakeholders.

ASEAN ENMAPS also takes pride in its holistic approach to governance. Strategic Environmental and Social Assessments are built into every step, ensuring that the rights and livelihoods of local fishers are safeguarded while upholding ecological thresholds. This shows that the project is not just drawing lines on a map—it is combining science, policy, and community into a resilient framework for the ocean's future.

Opportunities for scaling-up

Apart from aligning with the marine targets under the ASEAN Biodiversity Plan, ASEAN ENMAPS could also contribute to other existing ASEAN frameworks and strategies, such as the ASEAN Blue Economy Framework, by striking a balance between marine ecosystem health and economic growth in the region.

The project's completed scientific foundations and ongoing governance assessments present clear opportunities to scale up regional cooperation in marine conservation. Connectivity analyses and conceptual MPA network designs offer a replicable framework that can be extended to other ASEAN seascapes and aligned with regional commitments under the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the BBNJ Agreement. Capacity development activities, including Integrated Coastal Management training, Marine Spatial Planning and Ecosystems Approach to Fisheries Management, provide tested models that can be institutionalised through ASEAN platforms and national agencies.

The project's sustained knowledge products and regional dialogues establish mechanisms for sustained information sharing, peer learning, and coordinated planning. Building on these actions, ASEAN ENMAPS provides a practical pathway for expanding cooperative, nature-based solutions across the wider "One ASEAN seas."

ASEAN Biodiversity

By the Numbers



~25%

of world's known
flora and fauna



2,200+

new species described
1997–2014



660M+

people dependent on
ASEAN biodiversity

What is biodiversity?

UN Convention on Biological
Diversity (CBD) Article 2, 1992

“The variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.”

CBD recognises three
levels of biodiversity:



Level 1 – Genetic Diversity

Variation within and between populations of the same species – the raw material for adaptation and evolution.



Level 2 – Species Diversity

The abundance and variety of different species in a given area, measured through richness and evenness indices.



Level 3 – Ecosystem Diversity

The range of different habitats, ecological communities, and processes functioning together across a landscape.

CBD's three main objectives:



Conservation of biological diversity
protecting ecosystems, species, and genetic resources.



Sustainable use of its components
ensuring natural resources are used without depleting or harming them for future generations.



Fair and equitable sharing of benefits
from the use of genetic resources, particularly in developing countries.

The region's global significance

Despite occupying only ~3% of Earth's land area, ASEAN contains an extraordinary share of global biodiversity:



~3%

Share of Earth's land area



4

Biodiversity hotspots in region



3

Megadiverse countries in region



~25%

Share of world's described species



2,200+

New species described (1997–2014)



8 of 9

known worldwide

Honey bee species native to ASEAN



~5,000

Economically important crop species (food, medicinal, ornamental, timber)

Key ecosystems

Forest



~47%

of land area

Forest cover (2020)



>2

million km²

Total forest area



~56%

Share of world's tropical peatlands



~42%

Share of world's mangrove forests

**Peatland (56%) and mangrove (42%) global-share percentages appear in IUCN-linked academic literature.*

Marine and coastal



173,000

km

Total coastline



>25,000

Number of islands



28%

Share of world's coral reefs (Coral Triangle)



75%

of world's Reef-building coral species in Coral Triangle



50%

Marine fisheries as % of region's production (by value)



~80

million Fisheries sector employment



>20%

Share of global fisheries in ASEAN waters



At least

15%

Fish as % of animal protein for 100M+ people

**Fish is the primary source of protein for the majority of ASEAN's population, accounting for at least 15% of animal protein requirements for more than 100 million people – and up to 50% for some communities. More than 50% of the region's population lives along its 173,000 km of coastline.*

Wetlands

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (1971) provides the international framework for wetland conservation. ASEAN's Ramsar Sites:



26,592

km² Total ASEAN Ramsar Sites area



Thailand
15

Country with most Ramsar sites



Viet Nam
9

2nd most Ramsar sites



Philippines
8

3rd most Ramsar sites



Indonesia
13,729 km²

Largest wetland area (by country)

Threatened and at-risk species

Key statistics



The Red List Index for Southeast Asia as of February 2020 shows a

continuing and consistent increase

in the rate at which the region is losing its biodiversity



Vertebrate extinction risks are **highest in Southeast Asia**



154 species

Critically Endangered vertebrates in Southeast Asia



~45%

Critically Endangered species lacking conservation action



6 of top 20

Countries in Asia among top 20 globally for most threatened species

Critically endangered and vulnerable species in Southeast Asia



Sumatran Orangutan
Pongo abelii

Critically Endangered

~14,000 individuals; habitat loss from oil palm



Bornean Orangutan
Pongo pygmaeus

Endangered

Found only in Borneo; population decline due to logging and agricultural conversion



Philippine Eagle
Pithecophaga jefferyi

Critically Endangered

One of the world's largest eagles; 677 breeding pairs (1,354 mature individuals) remain due to deforestation and direct persecution

Red Lauan

Shorea negrosensis

Critically Endangered

With over 10,000 mature individuals recorded; declining population due to illegal logging and *kaingin* farming



Javan Rhinoceros
Rhinoceros sondaicus

Critically Endangered

~76 individuals; only in Ujung Kulon, Indonesia



Sumatran Rhinoceros
Dicerorhinus sumatrensis

Critically Endangered

Critically low population; active conservation programmes

Sumatran Tiger

Panthera tigris sumatrae

Critically Endangered

Fewer than 400 in the wild; deforestation and poaching



Pangolins

Manis spp. (8 species)

Critically Endangered - Vulnerable

Most trafficked mammals globally; poached for meat and medicine



Hawksbill Turtle

Eretmochelys imbricata

Critically Endangered

Populations have declined by more than 80% over the past century, with fewer than 25,000 nesting females estimated globally



Siamese Crocodile
Crocodylus siamensis

Critically Endangered

One of the world's rarest reptiles; fewer than 1,000 individuals are believed to survive in the wild



Singapore Freshwater Crab

Johora singaporensis

Critically Endangered

The species faces acute extinction risk from habitat degradation and urban encroachment



Irrawaddy Dolphin

Orcaella brevirostris

Endangered

Mekong River subpopulation numbers fewer than 100 individuals

Biodiversity loss projections



~8,000
km²/year

Annual forest loss
rate (2000–2020)



160,000
km²

Total forest lost
2000–2020



Up to 42%
of species

Projected
biodiversity loss
by 2100 (if trends
continue)



Red List Index
trend (SE Asia, to
Feb 2020)

**Consistent
upward
trend in loss**



Est.
USD 2.16
billion/year

Loss of ecosystem
services from
mangrove decline



5.2
million ha

Potential forest
contraction (worst-
case scenario)

Protected areas and conservation efforts

Protected area coverage (as of 2021)



15.57%

Terrestrial areas
protected across
ASEAN



~4%

Coastal and marine
areas protected



69
sites

Total number of
AHPs in the ASEAN
region



2,000+

Designated
protected areas
across ASEAN



2.05%

AHP terrestrial
coverage vs. total
ASEAN terrestrial
area



0.24%

AHP marine
coverage vs. total
ASEAN marine area

Indian Black Vulture *Sarcogyps calvus*

Critically Endangered

Fewer than 10,000
mature individuals remain
due to poisoning from
veterinary drugs used in
livestock

Vietnamese Paphiopedilum

*Paphiopedilum
vietnamense*

**Critically
Endangered**

A rare and strikingly
beautiful slipper
orchid; fewer
than 50 mature
individuals are
believed to
survive due to
overcollection



Malayan Sun Bear

Helarctos malayanus

Critically Endangered

The smallest bear
species in the world;
population is believed
to have declined by at
least 30% over three
generations

Key threat drivers (ACB and IUCN)



Habitat loss and fragmentation

Deforestation for agriculture
(especially palm oil), logging,
mining, and urban expansion;
SE Asia has the highest
deforestation rate of any
major tropical region globally.



Wildlife trade and hunting

Driven by demand for luxury
food, traditional medicine,
trophies, and exotic pets.
Vertebrate extinction risk is
“partly fueled by the huge
explosion in trade demand”
(ACB).



Pollution and invasive species

Plastic marine debris,
chemical pollution, and
the spread of invasive
alien species threaten
native biodiversity across
terrestrial, freshwater, and
marine ecosystems.



Climate change

Rising temperatures, sea level
rise, and changing precipitation
threaten coral reefs,
mangroves, and high-altitude
ecosystems.



References may be downloaded
from the following link: https://bit.ly/Issues49-50_Ref



Viet Nam hosts Eighth ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference

Focusing on aligning regional efforts with global biodiversity goals, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB), in partnership with the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Agency (NBCA) of Viet Nam, organised the Eighth ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference (AHP8) in Quang Ninh Province, Viet Nam.

With the theme, “ASEAN Heritage Parks: ASEAN’s Contribution to Achieving the Biodiversity Plan,” this milestone conference brought together park managers, protected area authorities, technical experts, institutional partners, and other key stakeholders to foster cross-sectoral dialogue, strengthen regional cooperation, and showcase how AHPs contribute to global biodiversity targets through nature-based solutions, climate action, sustainable resource management, and inclusive governance.

ACB Executive Director, Dr. Jerome Montemayor, notes, “We are very pleased that we are partnering with the Government of Viet Nam through the NBCA in organising AHP8 as a platform for knowledge exchange, partnership-building, and capacity development. We hope that this is an opportunity for us to

highlight the crucial role of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, women, and youth in achieving biodiversity goals.”

AHP8 included plenary sessions, parallel technical discussions, interactive exhibits, and field visits to showcase best practices in protected area management and ecosystem restoration. The technical sessions focused on nature-based solutions to climate change; health and biodiversity; engaging indigenous peoples and local communities, youth, and women in conservation; ecosystem restoration; the 30×30 biodiversity target; and sustainable financing for protected areas.

AHP8 also featured an exhibit of biodiversity-based products and other side events.

The NBCA was elated to host the conference. “It is an honour for us to host AHP8 this year. This partnership with the ACB is a testament to Viet Nam’s commitment to achieving its national biodiversity strategy and action plan and contributing to the broader goals of the ASEAN Biodiversity Plan and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

The AHP8, co-organised by the ACB and Viet Nam’s Ministry of Agriculture and Environment through the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Agency, received support from the European Union, the Federal Republic of Germany through KfW, the Metro Pacific Investments Corporation, and IMAWorld Health.

The AHP Programme is one of the flagship initiatives of ASEAN. It was established to recognise and highlight

ASEAN Heritage Parks

ASEAN Heritage Parks are “protected areas of high conservation importance, preserving in total a complete spectrum of representative ecosystems of the ASEAN region.” These areas are established to generate greater awareness, pride, appreciation, enjoyment and conservation of ASEAN’s rich natural heritage, through a regional network of representative protected areas, and to generate greater collaboration among ASEAN Member States in preserving their shared natural heritage.

By the Numbers



69 sites

Total AHPs across
10 ASEAN Member
States as of 2025



11.94 million
hectares

Legally gazetted protected area
covering terrestrial, marine and
wetland ecosystems



1984 established

First 11 parks designated
through the ASEAN Declaration
on Heritage Parks and Reserves

the importance of biodiversity and outstanding protected areas in regional and global efforts towards biodiversity conservation. From the 11 original protected areas of high conservation importance designated under the ASEAN Declaration on Heritage Parks and Reserves on 29 November 1984, the network has now grown to a total of 69 AHPs across the ASEAN Member States.

As the secretariat of the AHP Programme, the ACB organises a conference every three years in collaboration with ASEAN Member States and development partners. The conference serves as a regional platform for AHP managers, protected area authorities, technical experts, and institutional partners to enhance knowledge, strengthen partnerships, and build capacity for effective protected area management.



<https://www.aseanbiodiversity.org/the-asean-heritage-parks-programme/>

ASEAN HERITAGE PARKS A Timeline

1978

Concept first envisioned as a group of national parks and nature reserves with outstanding wilderness and biodiversity values.

1984

Programme formally established on 29 November 1984. First 11 AHPs declared through the ASEAN Declaration on Heritage Parks and Reserves, covering 6 founding member states

2003

New ASEAN Declaration on Heritage Parks issued on 18 December 2003. Additional AHPs recognised across 10 ASEAN Member States, including Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam.

2022

7th ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference held in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia — highlighting milestones and post-2020 regional action plans.

2024

AHP celebrates its 40th year. Five new parks added (3 Philippines, 2 Lao PDR), bringing the total to 62 AHPs covering 11.6 million hectares.

2025

Six new parks from Malaysia and Viet Nam declared at the 18th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment, bringing the total to 69 AHPs covering 11.87 million hectares.

2025

8th ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference hosted by Viet Nam in Quang Ninh Province, themed: "ASEAN Heritage Parks: ASEAN's Contribution to Achieving the Biodiversity Plan."

2025 ADDITIONS Six new ASEAN Heritage Parks



MALAYSIA · 64TH AHP

Tengku Hassanal Wildlife Reserve TERRESTRIAL

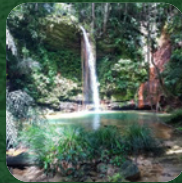
Declared at the 18th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on the Environment (AMME-18) in Langkawi, Malaysia. One of the oldest and largest reserves in Peninsular Malaysia, serving as a pristine "green lung" and a critical sanctuary for endangered megafauna such as the Malayan Tiger, the endangered Asian Elephant, and the Malayan Tapir.



MALAYSIA · 65TH AHP

Bako National Park TERRESTRIAL

One of Malaysia's oldest national parks; renowned for its diverse forest ecosystems and rich wildlife



MALAYSIA · 66TH AHP

Lambir Hills National Park TERRESTRIAL

Located in Sarawak, Borneo; known for exceptional tree species diversity in its tropical rainforest



VIET NAM · 67TH AHP

Pu Mat National Park TERRESTRIAL

Home to a wealth of large animals; protects important drainage basin ecosystems in central Viet Nam



VIET NAM · 68TH AHP

Dong Nai Culture and Nature Reserve TERRESTRIAL / WETLAND

Semi-evergreen ecosystem unique to Indochina; 1,553 plant species & 2,277 animal species including Asian elephants and gaurs; ecological corridor to Cat Tien NP



VIET NAM · 69TH AHP

Xuan Thuy National Park COASTAL / WETLAND

First Ramsar site in Southeast Asia (1988); core area of the Red River Delta World Biosphere Reserve; 1,656 species including 222 bird species

The six new parks added 271,036.3 hectares to the AHP network.

VALUE OF DESIGNATION

Benefits of AHP status**Knowledge Exchange**

Share good practices and experiences on protected area management across the regional network

**Capacity Development**

Participate in regional training, capacity-building, and awareness-raising activities organised by ACB

**International Partnerships**

Engage with potential regional and international conservation partners and funders

**Technical Assistance**

Receive support in enhancing protected area management

GOVERNANCE

ACB's role as Secretariat

Facilitates AHP nomination process



Conducts capacity development activities for AHP managers and staff



Organises AHP conferences, the main platform for regional knowledge exchange



Holds promotional activities for the AHP Programme regionally and globally



Facilitates coordination among AHP managers to strengthen the parks as a regional network



Guided by the ASEAN Working Group on Nature Conservation and Biodiversity (AWGNCB)

POLICY ALIGNMENT

AHPs and global biodiversity goals

Kunming-Montreal GBF Target 2



Kunming-Montreal GBF Target 3



ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and ASCC Blueprint 2025



ASEAN 2045 and ASCC Strategic Plan

AHPs contribute directly to Targets 2 and 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework—restoring degraded ecosystems and conserving at least 30% of land and sea by 2030.

AHPs are a flagship programme under the ASCC Blueprint 2025. Under the new ASCC Strategic Plan, they remain relevant, with biodiversity conservation now embedded within the broader goal of building a healthy ASEAN populace, reflecting a growing recognition that thriving ecosystems and human well-being are inseparable.



References may be downloaded from the following link: https://bit.ly/Issues49-50_Ref

ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) Initiatives

ASEAN Biodiversity Heroes

The ASEAN Biodiversity Heroes (ABH) recognises exceptional individuals from the ASEAN Member States who have contributed significantly to biodiversity efforts in their respective countries and the region.



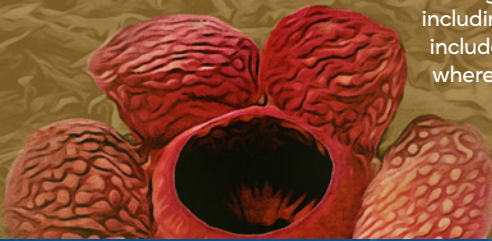
ASEAN Green Initiative

The ASEAN Green Initiative (AGI) is ASEAN's initiative encouraging the planting of at least 10 million native trees across the ASEAN region in 10 years.



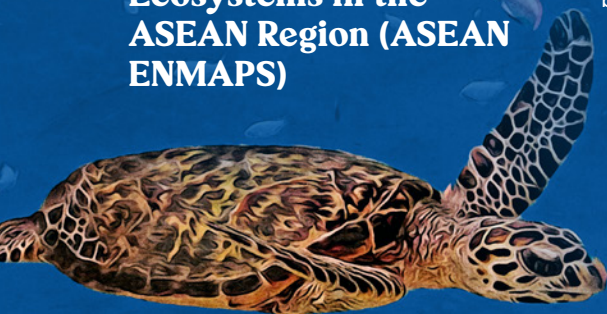
ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Programme

The ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Programme (AYBP) aims to empower youth in ASEAN to participate meaningfully in biodiversity decision-making processes and actions at the national, regional, and international levels. The programme includes the ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Leaders, a one-year fellowship, which supports young conservation advocates in ASEAN by building practical skills, expanding networks, and strengthening their ability to contribute to biodiversity action and policy, including learning about international biodiversity governance. It also includes Young ASEAN Storytellers, a youth communications programme, where selected ASEAN youth storytellers create and share compelling biodiversity stories, using platforms such as photography, writing, film or videography, artwork, and other creative media. (Youth beneficiaries of the programme are featured in pp. 42-47)



Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN Region (ASEAN ENMAPS)

ASEAN ENMAPS, short for Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN Region, is a five-year project (March 2024 to March 2029) that aims to strengthen the management and governance of marine protected areas and connected marine corridors across four large marine ecosystems (LME) in Southeast Asia: the Bay of Bengal, the Indonesian Seas, the South China Sea, and the Sulu Celebes Sea. The project applies science-based approaches—including integrated coastal management, marine spatial planning, and an ecosystem approach to fisheries management—in 11 pilot sites in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, building on national initiatives while engaging ASEAN working groups and cooperative LME governance. (An ENMAPS project stakeholder is featured in pp. 40-41)



To know more about regional initiatives for biodiversity conservation, scan this code:





Empowering Communities and Enhancing Biodiversity and Livelihoods through Small Grants

Local communities are actively participating in a mangrove restoration project supported by the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity's Small Grants Programme in the Mienmahla Kyun Wildlife Sanctuary

ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity

Amid the coastal wetlands of Myanmar, villagers stand ankle-deep in sticky mud, relentlessly digging holes to plant the mangrove saplings they have nurtured for months. This scene has become a familiar sight in Bogale town, where local communities are at the forefront of restoring the once-dwindling mangrove forest in Meinmahla Kyun Wildlife Sanctuary (MKWS)—a Ramsar site and one of Myanmar's ASEAN Heritage Parks (AHPs) supported by the Small Grants Programme (SGP) of the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity.

"We trained local people from 12 rural villages to improve their capacity in mangrove planting, specifically on nursery establishment, high-value planting methods, mixed farming methods, among others," says Tun Tun Zaw, Programme Officer of the Myanmar Environment Rehabilitation-conservation Network (MERN), a grantee of SGP in Myanmar.

Across Southeast Asia, similar initiatives have taken root in collective efforts to protect biodiversity while transforming the lives of local communities in and around select AHPs in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Viet Nam. AHPs are outstanding protected areas in the ASEAN region that have been recognised for their high conservation value and ecological diversity.

A community-led and driven initiative

One of ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity's flagship and long-standing programmes, the SGP was implemented in two phases with the support of the Federal Republic of Germany through the KfW Development Bank. The first phase (SGP I) was launched in 2014, focusing its interventions on six AHPs in Indonesia and Myanmar, while the second phase (SGP II) was launched in 2017 with special emphasis on four AHPs in Viet Nam.

At the core of the programme are micro- and small-grants awarded to projects that enhance wildlife monitoring and protection, build the capacity of park authorities, foster conservation awareness and community engagement, and promote ecotourism and community-led livelihood value chains.

Conservation above all

The ASEAN region is renowned for its rich natural resources, cradling four biodiversity hotspots and three megadiverse countries. Through SGP I and II, several initiatives contributed to improving biodiversity conservation in the region.

By means of MERN's mangrove restoration efforts, local authorities and 12 village communities restored over 720 hectares of mangroves in Meinmahla Kyun Wildlife Sanctuary, with a number of community nurseries producing 193,770 seedlings of 18 mangrove species.

In Viet Nam, SGP II assisted Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS) in improving wildlife research and monitoring of key primate and ungulate species—including the Grey-shanked Douc Langur (*Pygathrix cinerea*), Northern Yellow-cheeked Gibbon (*Nomascus annamensis*), and Truong Son Muntjac (*Muntiacus truongsonensis*). As a result, one distribution map assessing the species population was produced, and park staff of Kon Ka Kinh National Park (KKKNP) were trained to carry out effective wildlife monitoring using camera traps and other essential equipment provided by the programme.

In Indonesia's Way Kambas National Park (WKNP), SGP I helped address human-elephant conflicts through GPS tracking and joint forest patrols conducted by park authorities and local communities. Complementing this effort, the Kelompok Sadar Wisata (Tourism Awareness Group), or POKDARWIS, developed ecotourism packages—including community organisations in the picturesque village of Braja Harjosari—that offer tourists 12 unique activities, such as agrotourism, birdwatching, night safari, cultural shows, and elephant feeding.

By integrating elephants into the tourism experience, communities began to take an interest in their welfare, viewing them not as threats but as allies in development. This shift has helped transform tourism in WKNP from traditional mass tourism into a socialised, community-driven ecotourism model that promotes meaningful interaction with elephants.

Providing biodiversity-friendly livelihood alternatives

SGP I and II promoted sustainable development by supporting community-based livelihoods that align income generation with biodiversity conservation and the sustainable use of natural resources.

By investing in agroforestry, fisheries, ecotourism, and livelihood value chains, the programme helped ease pressures on the national park resources while empowering the community, including ethnic groups, women, and youth, to take an active role in their own development.



This is evident in the simple livelihood project in Gunung Leuser National Park (GLNP) that led to the formation of Kaya Ecoprint. This women-led enterprise designs a range of materials using natural pigments from various plants. With these natural dyes, the women craft unique and intricate designs in clothes, shawls, bags, and other fabrics and non-textile materials.

Similarly, the women from the Tày ethnic group in the buffer zone of Hoang Lien National Park (HLNP) have showcased their vibrant cultural traditions and their deep appreciation for biodiversity through ancestral crafts—producing textiles featuring nature-inspired motifs coloured with natural indigo. This tie-dye practice now serves as their important income source.

"After participating in the project, I learned how to draw and design patterns inspired by plants, birds, and monkeys in Hoang Lien. Because of the new designs, I can sell them at a higher price. For example, scarves that used to sell for 100,000 Vietnamese dong can now be sold at 150-200,000 Vietnamese dong," shares Ma Thi May, group member of Thu cong Hoang Lien.

The SGP supports the production of biodiversity-based products to provide additional income to local communities and reduce pressure on national parks.



The SGP supports the production of biodiversity-based products to provide additional income to local communities and reduce pressure on national parks

To date, the products of Kaya Ecoprint and Thu cong Hoang Lien have reached wide markets through e-commerce training, which developed the women's capacity to use social media to market their products online successfully.

Ecotourism has also been a key focus of SGP II's support in Viet Nam. The iconic Ba Be Lake, along with 37 other scenic spots and tourist attractions, five biodiversity sites, and 50 tourism and culinary services, all found in Ba Be National Park, are featured on a virtual reality website that allows visitors to explore destinations and book their visits in advance.

In HLNP, five new tourism routes were introduced, bringing the total to eight tourism routes available to visitors. Signages and maps were also installed throughout the park to support visitors' navigation. These improvements have enabled park management to apply for recognition as a provincial-level tourist area, thereby attracting more visitors and increasing the park's revenues.

Beyond tourism, the investments also supported the development of more than 60 biodiversity-based products, ranging from food items like honey, banana chips, green tea, turmeric powder, ginger lemongrass drink, pineapple dodol, to agricultural products such as organic rice and vegetables, salted eggs, and

meat products from duck and chicken, as well as marine products like shrimp paste, shredded fish, and fish nuggets.

The honey production project in Sa Thay commune, a buffer zone of Chu Mom Ray National Park, led to the establishment of a cooperative that supports 15 members with training on beekeeping techniques, honey production, and marketing. With the economic benefits and greater awareness, the cooperative members have become even more motivated to safeguard the forest and their livelihood.

"Since the cooperative provided me with beehives, I no longer go into the forest to collect wild honey, because it required climbing large tree branches and was very dangerous. I stay at home to take care of these beehives, as they have created additional income for my family's livelihood, and gradually I have come to love and develop a passion for these bees," says Ho Quoc Viet, a member of the Sa Thay Commune Beekeeping Cooperative.

Sustaining the gains: A lasting legacy of the SGP

To sustainably support mangrove restoration, MERN established a revolving fund in 12 villages to finance livelihood activities such as crab, goat,

and duck farming. The fund provided seed capital to community members, which is repaid with interest to support the livelihoods of additional households and reinvest in the continuous mangrove restoration efforts.

On the other hand, various projects are finding ways to continue by seeking other funding opportunities. "After SGP II ends, IDEA will continue accompanying the cooperative groups in promoting their products, while simultaneously seeking additional funding sources to support and further develop the group," says Nguyen Thu Huong, Project Coordinator of the Centre for Research and Action for Inclusive Development.

From restoring degraded forests to developing biodiversity-based livelihoods, the wealth of best practices and lessons learned from SGP I and II contribute to the overarching national and regional targets, offering other AHPs with models to follow.

"The SGP created a network of different sectors where knowledge, challenges, and lessons can be exchanged. These lessons from the programme implementation can be carried over to other AHPs undergoing similar contexts," explains Ms. Corazon De Jesus, Jr., Acting Director of the Programmes Department and Director of the Sustainable Use and Access and Benefit-Sharing Division of the ACB.

After more than a decade of implementation, the small seeds planted by the phases of SGP have grown into a tree yielding long-term benefits for communities. But the rewards can even be far-reaching through the sustained collaboration between communities and park management to ensure that gains extend beyond the project life cycle.

"Although implemented over a relatively short period, the long-term value is significant. Beyond immediate results, the skills and knowledge gained through SGP II support will continue to serve as a foundation for subsequent target programmes supporting the Management Board of Kon Ka Kinh National Park," explains Nguyen Ai Tam, Project Area Manager of FZS.

Ultimately, the projects espoused by the SGP have transformed not only the AHPs but also the people, as they become the heroes and stewards of their environment, achieving lasting impact for people and nature.



Business Sector Responds to ASEAN's Biodiversity Challenge

Metro Pacific Investments Corporation

In September 2023, the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) and the ASEAN Business Advisory Council established the ASEAN Business and Biodiversity Initiative (ABBI), a dynamic platform to accelerate progress in achieving biodiversity and climate goals across the region. This involves building partnerships with the business sector and expanding this network to integrate biodiversity considerations in business operations and promote nature-based solutions to mitigate climate change impacts.

Metro Pacific Investment Corporation (MPIC), a leading Philippine-based investment management and infrastructure holding company, has been a key figure in advancing ABBI in Southeast Asia. MPIC's vision is to make a difference in the lives of Filipinos and to meet societal

challenges by maximising economic opportunities, combined with inclusive growth, environmental stewardship, and good governance. MPIC is a pioneer in enhancing private-sector contributions to ASEAN's global biodiversity goals and targets by supporting biodiversity-friendly and climate-smart operations.

Its unwavering commitment to environmental protection is unparalleled and has been delivering a strong, powerful voice on business and biodiversity at international conventions, such as UN meetings and world expositions.

Mainstreaming biodiversity and sustainability in business operations

MPIC advances a business strategy that is deeply rooted in ecosystem restoration, biodiversity protection, and responsible stewardship—imperative firmly embedded in its sustainability framework. Managing environmental and social impacts is both an ecological duty and an economic necessity for the group. Beyond meeting regulatory obligations, MPIC continuously elevates its operational standards to safeguard the natural environment and the communities it serves.

For nearly two decades, MPIC has invested in large-scale biodiversity conservation programmes across the Philippines. Since 2006, the Metro Pacific Investments Foundation, MPIC's corporate social responsibility arm, has been implementing the Shore It Up! (SIU!) initiative, one of the country's longest-running and award-winning marine protection programmes. Now in its 16th year, SIU! has provided critical support to the UNESCO-inscribed Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park and multiple coastal sites in Batangas, Surigao, Marinduque, and other marine biodiversity hotspots. Through these efforts, MPIC and MPIF continue to champion multi-sectoral partnerships that preserve the nation's natural heritage for future generations.

MPIC is also part of a historic private-sector coalition committed to protecting the Verde Island Passage (VIP)—recognised as the “centre of the world's marine biodiversity.” In May 2024, MPIC, together with two other conglomerates in the country, formalised a joint stewardship commitment through an MOU with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Department of Energy (DOE). This collaboration reinforces the critical role of business in conserving the VIP, a vital marine area not only for its ecological richness but also for its importance to local fisheries, livelihoods, and ecotourism.

Complementing its marine initiatives, MPIC is equally focused on enhancing urban biodiversity. In 2022, the company entered into a landmark public-private partnership with the DENR and Quezon City local government to promote urban

biodiversity and reconnect communities with nature. In 2023, the Gabay Kalikasan Park was developed, setting a new model for urban green park development.

Subsidiaries across the MPIC Group further reinforce these commitments through extensive reforestation programmes.

- Meralco's One for Trees has planted over 2.7 million trees and provided sustainable livelihood to local communities.
- Maynilad's Plant for Life has planted about 1.5 million trees across nearly 2,000 hectares and provided alternative livelihood opportunities to the indigenous community, Dumagat, living inside the Ipo Watershed.
- Metro Pacific Tollways Corporation's Greening the Expressways programme plants 10,000 trees annually along its expressways to enhance air quality and mitigate vehicle-related emissions

To embed sustainability into organisational culture, MPIC has also introduced an EESG-linked compensation scheme, tying a portion of employee incentives to Environmental, Economic, Social, and Governance targets—including biodiversity conservation and partnerships.

Together, these efforts demonstrate how MPIC integrates biodiversity protection directly into its business strategy—strengthening ecosystem resilience, supporting community livelihoods, and ensuring long-term value creation for stakeholders, not just in the Philippines but across the ASEAN region.

Partnership with the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity

MPIC's motivation to invest in biodiversity conservation and sustainability initiatives stems from a clear and urgent reality: our businesses are deeply interconnected with nature and highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. As a provider of essential services—from water and energy to transportation, healthcare, and agriculture—any disruption in natural systems directly affects our ability to serve millions of Filipinos. We are already seeing these impacts, and

they reinforce the need for long-term, science-based action.

This is why MPIC integrates finance, risk, and sustainability under a single overarching function—an uncommon yet deliberate approach that ensures environmental and social considerations are embedded in core business decisions. It reflects our vision for sustainable development: mitigating financial, social, and ecological risks while identifying opportunities that create both business value and positive environmental impact.

Our partnership with the ACB is a cornerstone of this commitment. The ACB is the region's leading institution for biodiversity conservation, and aligning with them allows MPIC to ground its initiatives in globally recognised science, regional expertise, and credible frameworks. The renewal of our three-year partnership in 2023 underscores the importance we place on working with an institution that shares our commitment and has a strong mandate across ASEAN.

The collaboration strengthens nature-positive action and supports broader goals of climate resilience and sustainable development.

MPIC's investment in biodiversity conservation, especially our partnership with ACB, is driven by both responsibility and necessity: to protect the natural systems our operations rely on, to safeguard the communities we serve, and to contribute meaningfully to the resilience and sustainability of the ASEAN region.

Sustainable and biodiversity-friendly initiatives

MPIC, its foundation, and its operating companies have delivered tangible environmental and social impacts across marine protection, mangrove restoration, urban greening, regional biodiversity partnerships, energy transition, and agriculture. These projects showcase how an infrastructure company can be a force for sustainable development, benefitting both nature and communities.

MPIC, through its power arm, Meralco, is leading the energy transition in the Philippines. Meralco, through MGreen



Renewable Energy Inc., is building Terra Solar, the world's largest integrated solar and battery storage facility, with 3,500 megawatts peak (MWp) of solar capacity and 4,000 megawatt-hour (MWh) battery storage. Consequently, Meralco has accelerated its energy transition through MGEN's renewable energy (RE) portfolio, which provides power to over 400,000 households.

The landmark Cebu-Cordova Link Expressway (CCLEX) of Metro Pacific Tollways Corporation was carefully designed and intentionally made longer to save and protect the dominant 278-kilometre mangrove forests, which serve as spawning grounds for fish and natural barriers to protect the communities from destructive waves and storm surges. Recognised as the "Fishermen's Bridge," CCLEX was built with additional clearance and channels to give local fisherfolk and their boats access to their traditional fishing grounds, preserving their long-established way of life.

In 2022, MPIC's water arm, Maynilad, launched its NEW WATER project, which recycles used water for potable application, an innovative way of augmenting Metro Manila's water supply. More NEW WATER treatment plants will be built to increase their current capacity of five million litres per day (MLD) of NEW WATER. Once operational, all five NEW WATER treatment plants will have a total combined capacity of 97 MLD, enough to supply approximately 400,000 customers.

MPIC's wholly owned agriculture unit, Metro Pacific Agro Ventures, launched

the 22-hectare vegetable greenhouse complex, the largest in the Philippines. This plays a significant role in strengthening the country's food security through strategic investments in value-added agriculture and cutting-edge, technology-driven vegetable production. These efforts help stabilise food supply, reduce import dependence, support farmers, and build a more resilient, modern agricultural sector.

Engagement with stakeholders and communities

MPIC engages employees, stakeholders, and local communities in its biodiversity and sustainability programmes. Through Metro Pacific Investments Foundation, the corporation mobilises its staff and volunteers from its operating companies to take part in coastal and underwater cleanups, ecological education campaigns, and mangrove propagation projects, thereby building a culture of environmental stewardship from within.

For local communities, MPIF trains Marine Protection, Inspection, and Conservation (MPIC) Guardians, composed of fisherfolk volunteers and members of Bantay-Dagat [sea patrol] groups. MPIF equips them with patrol equipment and helps institutionalise their role through local government partnerships. It also supports alternative livelihoods, such as eco-guides, and builds local centres, such as Mangrove Propagation and Information Centres, to provide education and community-based restoration.

At the stakeholder level, MPIC partners with government agencies, academic institutions, and regional bodies to drive more systemic, science-based biodiversity work.

These engagements bring both opportunities and challenges. On the opportunity side, MPIC is building strong local ownership by empowering communities as stewards, creating green livelihood pathways, and raising conservation awareness via multi-sector fora. However, sustaining stakeholder engagement over the long term is difficult, as it requires ongoing funding.

Why the business sector must champion biodiversity

Protecting biodiversity is no longer optional. It is a business imperative and a shared responsibility. The natural ecosystems that sustain our companies, our people, and our economies are under threat, and every organisation has a role to play in restoring them. Championing biodiversity conservation is an investment in long-term resilience, climate security, and economic growth. The companies that thrive in the future will be those that recognise nature as a critical asset, embed sustainability into their strategies, and act decisively to protect the ecosystems that sustain their operations and communities.

The views and opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent the policy or official position of ASEAN

The Nature of Health

Linking Biodiversity, Animal Habitat Loss, Human Illnesses and One Health in ASEAN



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Biodiversity is essential for sustaining the lives of people, animals, plants, and microorganisms, and for creating healthy ecosystems that provide clean air and food. However, biodiversity is under threat from human activities, including overfishing, overhunting, pollution, overdevelopment, and climate change. These disturbances can alter the abundance of organisms, population dynamics, and ecological interactions, thereby affecting infectious diseases. Increased contact among wildlife, livestock, and people increases the risk of disease transmission, or zoonosis (WHO, 2025).

There are global frameworks and approaches to help address these various challenges. One Health is a transdisciplinary, collaborative, and multi-tiered approach that aims to achieve optimal health outcomes by recognising the association among people, animals, plants, microorganisms, and their shared environment. Using this lens in looking at biodiversity shows how biodiversity conservation reinforces health security, strengthens climate resilience, and supports sustainable development. There is strong advocacy for integrating biodiversity into One Health to address biodiversity hotspots that overlap with dense populations, production landscapes, and zoonotic spillover risks (IUCN, 2025).

Underlying this is the recognition of the interdependence of human, domestic, and wild animal health, plant health, and the environment, which requires integrated surveillance.

ASEAN's One Health approach is a strategic, multi-sectoral framework designed to sustainably balance the health of people, animals, and ecosystems in the region. Formally

adopted at the 42nd ASEAN Summit (2023), the ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the One Health Initiative serves as the primary regional mandate. This declaration underscores the necessity of a holistic response to "health threats at the human-animal-plant-environment interface," specifically targeting zoonotic diseases, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and food safety (ASEAN, 2023).

The operational core of this initiative is the ASEAN One Health Network, which coordinates cross-sectoral efforts between health, agriculture, forestry, and environmental sectors. This is guided by the ASEAN One Health Joint Plan of Action, a document that aligns regional targets with global standards to enhance "prevention, preparedness, and response (PPR)" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024).

Key cross-sectoral initiatives focus on preventing zoonotic spillovers. ASEAN recognises that more than 75 per cent of emerging infectious diseases originate in wildlife, driven largely by biodiversity loss and habitat fragmentation (ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity, 2023). The ASEAN Strategy for Preventing Zoonotic Disease Transmission from Wildlife Trade (2022) specifically addresses these links, noting that anthropogenic land-use changes and unregulated wildlife markets create "high-risk super-interfaces" for pathogen spillover (ASEAN, 2022). By integrating the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB) into One Health discussions, the region aims to mainstream ecosystem restoration and wildlife conservation as essential public health interventions.

ASEAN One Health Sectoral Responsibilities



Human Health

Senior Officials Meeting on Health Development (SOMHD)

Public Health and AMR

Surveillance of zoonotic diseases in humans; managing Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) in clinical settings; pandemic preparedness.



Environment

ASEAN Senior Officials on the Environment (ASOEN)

Ecosystems and Wildlife

Monitoring land-use change and habitat loss; regulating wildlife trade; assessing the impact of climate change on disease vectors.



Animal Health

ASEAN Sectoral Working Group on Livestock (ASWGL)

Livestock and Veterinary

Monitoring diseases in domestic animals and poultry; enhancing biosecurity in farms and markets; coordinating "Field Epidemiology Training."



Biodiversity

ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity (ACB)

Prevention at Source

Managing Protected Areas to reduce human-wildlife contact; mainstreaming "Biodiversity-Health" linkages into regional policy.

References may be downloaded from the following link: https://bit.ly/Issues49-50_Ref



One Health Surveillance

Expanding the lens beyond human cases



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ASEAN Biological Threats Surveillance Centre

Zoonotic threats emerge where humans, animals, and the environment interact—through livestock production systems, wildlife interfaces, food chains, markets, and ecological conditions that shape exposure opportunities. That is why One Health surveillance is not an “add-on” to epidemic intelligence; it is the core operating model for detecting spillover early enough to prevent amplification.

When surveillance focuses only on human case detection, it often detects outbreaks late, after transmission has already occurred and response options have narrowed. Integrating animal health and environmental signals can identify risk upstream. In avian influenza, for example, unusual poultry die-offs or outbreaks in backyard flocks may precede human exposure. In Nipah, spillover risk is tightly linked to bat ecology and exposure pathways—such as contamination of food or

environments, where bat–human contact becomes more likely.

For many zoonoses, animal morbidity and mortality function as leading indicators. Monitoring livestock and wildlife health—poultry flock die-offs, swine respiratory syndromes, unusual illness in wildlife, or shifts in veterinary reporting—can flag risk days to weeks before human cases appear. A One Health approach, therefore, improves both the timeliness and specificity of data, helping distinguish whether human clusters plausibly connect to an active animal epizootic or to unrelated respiratory disease circulation.

Global animal databases and platforms such as FAO EMPRES-i and the WOA H WAHIS contribute animal health data, references, and structured signals that are essential for interpreting zoonoses and can complement human-focused data and information.

From spillover signals to regional situational awareness: ABVC's role in zoonoses surveillance

In 2025, two different zoonotic events happened almost at the same time that may pose threats to ASEAN's regional health security. The outbreaks may begin locally, but their implications can become regional quickly. In India's Kerala State, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported four confirmed Nipah virus cases (two deaths) between 17 May and 12 July 2025, prompting intensive contact tracing and heightened hospital alerts across multiple districts. Meanwhile, Cambodia faced recurrent human avian influenza A(H5N1) infections. The WHO documented 11 laboratory-confirmed cases notified between 1 January and 1 July 2025, with an unusual concentration in June and exposures frequently linked to handling

sick or dead backyard poultry. Together, these events—one outside ASEAN but epidemiologically relevant, one within ASEAN with direct cross-border implications—illustrate why the ASEAN Biological Threats Surveillance Centre (ABVC) exists: to convert early warning signals into coherent, decision-ready information that supports timely action.

ABVC's work is based on epidemic intelligence and biological threats surveillance. Its surveillance workflow is intentionally designed to be repeatable, rapid, and standardised across diseases and countries: collect structured and event-based signals, clean and validate, analyse trends and risks, visualise patterns for quick comprehension, and report outputs to stakeholders. In practice, ABVC operationalises this through scripted pipelines—methods that reduce manual friction, improve reproducibility, and allow the Centre to refresh analyses as new data emerges.

ABVC's reports blend two complementary surveillance modes. Indicator-based surveillance draws on routine, structured data—time-series trends, case counts, and other standardised indicators that can be tracked over time. These feeds are essential for identifying abnormal increases, shifts in seasonality, and geographic spread patterns.

Event-based surveillance captures unstructured or semi-structured signals—such as subnational reports, alerts, official statements, and credible outbreak notifications. Event-based intelligence is particularly important in the early phase of outbreaks, when formal reporting may lag, definitions may still be evolving, or epidemiologic details may emerge in fragments.

To support this dual approach, ABVC pulls from established open and platform sources: Bluedot Platform, WHO EIOS, and FluNet. This selection reflects a practical design principle: ABVC needs sources that are (a) sufficiently broad to cover multi-country risk, (b) frequently updated, and (c) structured enough to feed analytic workflows without excessive manual handling.

The purpose of this collection layer is not just to gather “more data.” It is to create an integrated and traceable evidence base—one that can be refreshed quickly, checked against

other sources, and transformed into standardised representations across ASEAN Member States.

Analysis: Translating signals into risk-relevant indicators

ABVC's analytic layer focuses on turning heterogeneous records into comparable regional indicators and operationally relevant narratives. In the avian influenza pipeline, the analytic steps include typical transformations such as standardising column names, deriving analytic fields, and separating animal- and human-impact signals. That last step is particularly important for zoonoses: signals may originate in animal health systems before they appear in human case reports, and those two streams must be analysed in relationship—not in isolation.

For zoonoses specifically, ABVC's analytic posture also prioritises exposure narratives—animal contact, contaminated environments, or limited human-to-human transmission—because these details translate directly into practical actions: clinician alerts, infection prevention and control (IPC) reminders, animal health coordination, and risk communication targeted to the right settings.

Zoonotic surveillance for regional readiness

Zoonoses surveillance is a race against time and ambiguity. Early signals are noisy, definitions differ across systems, and response capacity is uneven. ABVC's structured workflow—spanning data collection, validation, analysis, visualisation, and reporting—reduces friction at each stage, enabling ASEAN stakeholders to move more quickly from signal to a shared understanding.

In a year when Nipah events in South Asia and avian influenza spillovers within ASEAN both tested regional vigilance, the strategic case for ABVC is straightforward: early warning is only as good as the system that translates warnings into timely, coordinated readiness. By institutionalising repeatable pipelines and embedding One Health thinking into epidemic intelligence, ABVC strengthens ASEAN's ability to anticipate zoonotic risk, communicate it clearly, and support decisive action before local spillover becomes a wider regional threat.



Learn more about the ASEAN Biological Threats Surveillance Centre: <https://asean-phe.org/asean/data-publications/disease-alert>



Women-Led Mapping on Wakatobi's Coast

Megawati

ENMAPS Programme
Enumerator



Ixora Tri Devi

Staff Writer, The ASEAN

*Analysis Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural
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Thirty-four-year-old Megawati, a community worker based in Wangi-wangi Island in Wakatobi Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, joined the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity's Effectively Managing Networks of Marine Protected Areas in Large Marine Ecosystems in the ASEAN Region (ENMAPS) Programme in 2025 at the start of its five-year implementation. Megawati is a perfect fit, having been born and raised on the island renowned for its seascapes and coral ecosystems that span more than 90,000 hectares and sustain dense marine life. A mother of one, a school mentor, national park trainer, and vendor, Megawati now applies her breadth of experience to serve as an ENMAPS Programme enumerator, which involves interviewing fishermen from the Bajo tribe.

Megawati grew up in a family that ran a small grocery shop and a telephone kiosk (warung telepon, or wartel). After high school, she and about a dozen other students from Wakatobi, short for Wangi-wangi, Kaledupa, Tomia, and Binongko, received a government scholarship to study fisheries in Jakarta at Sekolah Tinggi Perikanan, now Politeknik Ahli Usaha Perikanan (Jakarta Technical University

of Fisheries). The experience strengthened her understanding of coastal livelihoods.

After graduating in 2013, her parents asked her to return home. Over the next thirteen years, Megawati's career was built by the islands and their changing economy. She supported local and international organisations working with coastal communities, established a catering





Megawati's grasp of local fish names helped align community knowledge with survey questions



Working as an enumerator, Megawati interviewed 8 to 10 fishers each day, three days a week or more

Photo Credit: ©Megawati

business with women from the island, worked as a private tour guide, and even produced *oleh-oleh* [snack and souvenirs] for tourists.

"My background is in natural resource management, not in seafood processing. But at school, they also took us to places where coastal communities exhibited their products, so I understood the potential," Megawati recalls.

"At that time, I would tell other women, 'let's make keychains' or 'let's make food products.' But back then, I had just graduated, and I had not achieved anything, so people looked down on me. They thought it was a waste of time," she adds.

The ENMAPS Programme would equip the community with skills and tools to sustainably harness marine resources as a livelihood source while protecting coastal/marine ecosystems. It would also support efforts to revitalise Wangi-wangi's flagging tourism industry.

Tourism on the islands, Megawati recalls, used to be more lucrative. She remembered a tourism surge in the early 2010s, when Wakatobi Regency was newly established.

"Tourists used to be far more numerous. International youth forums happened here. Everything was here. Wakatobi was better known abroad than in Indonesia, and promotions overseas were stronger. Back then, there was almost no off-season, and tourists kept coming. But now, especially after COVID, flights are gone, and getting here is expensive. Sea transport now offers more options, but air travel is still costly. Visitor numbers are very low. Only a few foreign tourists stop here with their own boats on the way east," she says.

After joining the ENMAPS Programme, Megawati began working with the

fishermen. It was her first chance to work with the Bajo fishermen who live only about three kilometres from her home. Across Indonesia, Bajo communities have long built their lives around the sea, with populations in Southeast Sulawesi, Central Sulawesi, East Kalimantan, and parts of Nusa Tenggara.

"Thunder, lightning, strong wind, and strong waves. Many fishermen catch fish near the coast with nets. Some had not gone out to sea for a week, some even longer. Even people who live on the islands felt afraid," she says.

"I interviewed Bajo fishermen for ENMAPS. The last time I went, it felt scary. Even near the coast, without rain, the wind was still so strong. Sand blew into my eyes. Sometimes, we had to cut the interview short and came back the next day," adding that she visited the community two or three times a week.

As an ENMAPS enumerator, Megawati shares the job with five others across the islands of Wakatobi. Of the six people working, five are women.

"I feel genuinely happy because this programme truly puts women forward. It gives women a chance to step onto the stage, take part in every role, and make decisions."

At first, Megawati doubted herself. She was unsure she could earn the trust of the fishing community, since most of them are men. However, she understands that many fishermen speak little Indonesian, they used *Bajo* language, and identify fish by local names, which can complicate interviews and data collection. That gap convinced her that her local knowledge and fisheries background mattered. She could act as a bridge between the community and the programme.

Despite her initial hesitation, Megawati has successfully established a good connection with the Bajo fishing community.

"I have become a friend they hang out with, both the fathers and the mothers. I enjoy seeing their daily lives up close. You see the wives selling the fish their husbands catch at the market. But it still comes back to the same issue: they lack financial management skills," she says.

Megawati expressed optimism about the programme and its direct impact on people's lives. She has watched organisations come and go. Many arrive with training sessions and short projects, then leave without a trace.

"People are tired of the same training again and again. To this day, they cannot climb the social ladder to the top. No one ends up producing anything. If one or two people do, they are usually the ones who have endured for years. Most programmes do not finish the job," she assesses.

"Many programmes run well while the organisations are present. But once the programme ends, everything starts again from zero," she adds.

She compares development work to cultivation. People nurture a plant with care, fertiliser, and attention, yet the people who cared for it from the beginning are often the first to abandon it once it finally bears fruit. Megawati hopes ENMAPS will break this pattern.

"I hope that whatever projects ENMAPS runs will be planned carefully, with clear outcomes that people can carry forward. I hope that even after ENMAPS ends, the roots remain here so people can keep growing. That could take the form of a community group, a local NGO, or stronger involvement from the local government," she concludes.

Sowing Seeds of Care

Mark Liao

2019 ASEAN Youth
Biodiversity Leader

SESAMA KITA, DIJAGA



Ixora Tri Devi
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Mark Liao's journey into biodiversity work began in 2017 when he joined the Borneo Eco-Warriors programme under the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI). He was 22 then when he latched onto this idea and, in the same year, established an environmental NGO that similarly focuses on community-oriented conservation.



He told *The ASEAN*, "Sarawak Eco Warriors was formed because of many accidents, and those accidents are what strengthened us and gave us our sense of identity today."

After graduating with a degree in human resources management from Swinburne University of Technology, Australia, he joined Wildlife Conservation Society Malaysia as a communications and events executive. The two-year stint deepened his understanding of environmental issues. His connection with the group continues to support his work today.

Mark describes his life before learning about biodiversity issues as "flat" and uneventful. He has since discovered Sarawak's rich ecosystems of ancient rainforests and peat swamp forests, which are home to diverse plant and animal species, including endangered wildlife, such as the critically endangered Bornean orangutan. It is also home to Indigenous communities whose lives are closely tied to these landscapes.

Mark laments that many students in Kuching talk more about how to protect polar bears that live halfway around the world. "They will say we need to protect the polar bear, protect the Amazon rainforest. But what about Sarawak? What about Borneo? And then they will say, 'But there is nothing here!'" he recalls.

That answer, which once echoed his own feelings before he entered the field, pushed him to do more to raise awareness of biodiversity.

The COVID-19 pandemic, logistical and personal issues stalled Sarawak Eco Warrior's journey. "During this time, Sarawak Eco Warriors was entirely volunteer-based. The problem with volunteer work is that it has an expiration date. Nobody can volunteer forever," Mark explains.

He struggled to keep the group together and soon realised the need for a reset. Just as some seeds can only germinate after a forest fire, the organisation can grow by letting it "burn" and rebuilding from its ashes, he said.

In 2021, he began rebuilding the organisation from the ground up, including laying the



Mark Liao and Sarawak Eco Warriors work with local communities to co-create and restore ecosystems

foundations for Plants for Plastics. The idea behind Plants for Plastics, Mark explains, is to create more green job opportunities linked with nature conservation. The long-term goal is for the young people involved to become environmental leaders.

"That is the best thing that I have ever done because it has allowed us to grow stronger. Although I cannot retain everyone from the original team, now I get to support younger people who want to do something for the state."

Grants and running projects enable Sarawak Eco Warriors to sustain their work.

"Recently, we also ran a programme with the local government, for example, when they have a programme with UNICEF, Child Friendly Cities, that is where we will come in to support them. We tried really hard to generate income because by doing so, we can sustain more people to really do the work they want to do."

The community has also grown in scale. Now, it runs at least 4 programmes, with more than 4,000 participants each year.

With this progress comes recognition. In 2025, Mark received three awards: Environmental Education 30 Under 30, the Premier of Sarawak Environmental Award, and the Giving Economy Award.

"But I do not take pride in awards," he says. "The reason why I am going for these awards is that, in order to work with the government and big corporations, I need that sense of recognition. They will not listen to me unless I have something backing me up."

Mark says the real challenge now is turning enthusiasm into livelihoods. More young people are interested in conservation, yet there are too few jobs and too many fragile, volunteer-only initiatives. "To build is easy; to sustain is difficult," he says.

In his office, a lush garden space set within a traditional Chinese farmhouse near Kuching's city centre, Mark shares this message with young people in the region: "Never believe that you are too small to do something. Together, we are all doing small things to create a bigger impact."

Mark shares that the group's next project is to develop teaching tools on Sarawak's landscapes for schools, "We hope teachers can bring them back to their communities and later adapt them into modules that can be scaled with corporate support."

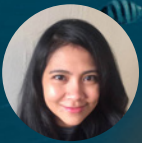
The 2019 ASEAN Youth Biodiversity Leader urges policymakers, including ASEAN leaders, to see the youth not just as actors who need to be integrated, "but rather ask how young people can come to support you and your programmes."



On Dolphins and Coastal Life in the Gulf of Mottama

Thae Eaindra Hsu

2023 Youth
Biodiversity Leader



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Twenty-five-year-old Thae Eaindra Hsu was born and raised in Mawlamyine, Mon State, Myanmar. Mawlamyine is known for its golden pagodas and its proximity to the Gulf of Mottama Ramsar site, a coastal wetland area recognised for its biodiversity and the communities that depend on it.

Growing up near the coast drew her into conservation work. Since 2021, she has worked with local conservation groups. She also joined a community-based marine conservation externship supported by the National Geographic Society and The Nature Conservancy, which further shaped her approach to community engagement and conservation practice.

While Thae studied English literature, she “learned everything by experience.” Alongside conservation, she is also a hobbyist photographer. She is able to combine her concern about climate change with creativity and storytelling.



Thae Eaindra Hsu during a marine mammal campaign in coastal villages, 2023



Interview with women fishers on marine life and dolphins, 2023

Thae cannot hide her enthusiasm when talking about dolphins. Holding a dolphin toy, she explains that it represents an Irrawaddy dolphin, one of the species found in the Gulf of Mottama alongside the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin and the Indo-Pacific finless porpoise.

She tells *The ASEAN* that dolphins are her favourite marine animals because they have a “beautiful smile.” She still remembers the thrill of seeing them up close in 2022.

“We went out around 6 a.m. and came back around 4 p.m. Out on the water, we did population assessments,” Thae recalls. “It was extremely hot. We were covered from head to toe. We were exhausted, but when we saw the dolphins, all the tiredness went away,” she recalls.

In 2024, Thae worked under the supervision of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Myanmar as a Conservation and Research Associate, mentoring a marine mammal team and supporting their outreach in coastal communities. The challenge, she says, is making science understandable and relevant.

“When we told them the scientific facts, they were not interested. They did not understand because the scientific terms are very complicated and complex,” she says.

So, the team changed tactics. “Our team tried to make visual aids, using silicone to make dolphin toys. We used the dolphin toys on the ground and showed them as a stranded dolphin on the beach. Another

toy wrapped in the fishnet. They can easily understand it because it is really happening in their life,” Thae says, holding up the same toy she showed to *The ASEAN*.

She says the approach also matters for children. “When we talked about science first, they were not interested. But when we gave them the colouring pencils and crayons, they started asking questions: What is this? What is that?”

The team also asks children to write letters to dolphins. One note says: “Run away from the fishing net!” Thae believes that shows how quickly children build care for marine life when learning feels personal and accessible. “Environmental education is very important, but it does not always mean that we have to study and learn in the classroom. We can teach everywhere,” she says.

She adds that innovation does not have to mean advanced technology. It can mean using creativity to translate scientific terms into something communities recognise in their everyday lives, then building practical action from that shared understanding.

“For example, when there is a dolphin stranded, the only people there will be the community, so they must respond immediately,” she says. “If it is alive, we need to release them back to the ocean systematically without harming them. We need to give them the training. It needs to come from the community, creating a bridge, building common knowledge, and scientific action.”

Thae sees that when science becomes a relatable story, more people show up. Her work also brings new opportunities. She was selected as an ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity Young Biodiversity Leader in 2023. While she cannot travel,

she joins the programme online and continues to receive invitations to other regional activities, including speaking engagements. She also receives support for opportunities linked to donors such as the European Union and National Geographic.

Along the way, Thae also recognises a wider shift in youth interest. Despite the constraints created by the political situation in Myanmar, social media and internet access make it easier for young people to learn about biodiversity issues. Many are also eager to find volunteer or internship opportunities that build experience. She points to another factor, too: crises push environmental concerns into everyday life.

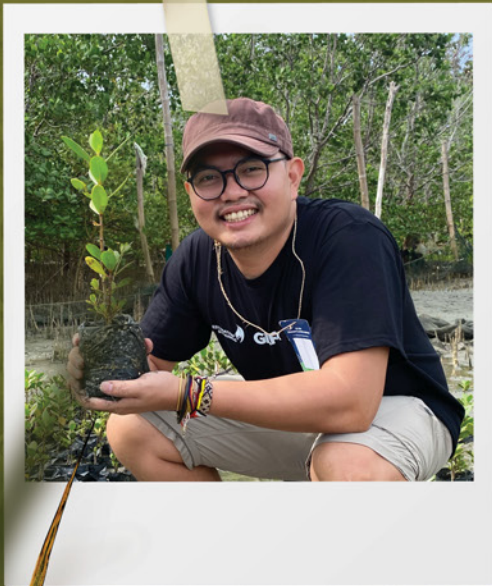
“In March (2025), there was an earthquake. 7.7 magnitude, a really big disaster,” she says. “That is why people are more willing to care about their nature and environment. They are trying to do their best in each role, not only in biodiversity conservation but also in waste management and risk reduction. In each field, there are a lot of young people engaging and trying to fill the space.”

For young people who want to be involved in conservation without a science background, Thae offers her own path as proof. “Conservation has taught me that passion, people, and creativity are just as important as science,” she says. “Even though you do not have a science background, you can pursue your passion and do what you like to do.”

Capturing the Threads That Connect Us

Bricx Dumas

2022 ACB Young
ASEAN Storyteller



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Brikko Martillo Dumas, known as Bricx, is a 34-year-old Filipino artist, educator, and climate advocate. He was born in Leyte, in the Philippines' Eastern Visayas region, and moved to Manila as a teenager. When Typhoon Haiyan (locally known as Yolanda) devastated Leyte in 2013, Bricx returned home to bring his grandmother to safety and volunteer. He ended up staying for two months and handled logistics on the ground. He also helped set up community feeding and arts therapy programmes for children. In early 2014, he returned with solar panels to power several areas still without electricity.

For Bricx, the scenes and smells of disaster and death are still vivid: fallen trees, people waiting for help, fear of looting, and the stench of bodies. It was a defining moment that made the impact of climate change real for him.





Photo taken by Bricx in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan



In early 2022, Bricx became involved in regional storytelling campaigns, including the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity's Young ASEAN Storyteller programme

Bricx studied fine arts in college. After graduating, he built a freelance career in multimedia, including video, photography, and illustration. His volunteer work after Haiyan, followed by a 2016 documentary project with the Palawan Indigenous community, drew him closer to climate change activism, cultural heritage preservation, and Indigenous Peoples rights.

"A week after that project, I went back to Manila, and I tried to apply for a teaching job. I kept thinking, 'Why are these stories not shared in schools?'"

He taught senior high school for two years. Teaching helped him bring those stories into the classroom, though it left him less time for his own practice.

In 2021, when he felt unsure about whether he could keep going as an artist, a client reached out with a commission. He took it as a push back to the studio and a reminder to take his work seriously again.

"That same year, I won the DigitalArt4Climate contest, which was part of the COP26 programme," he says. "It was empowering for the creative community. It showed me how powerful art could be. It can carry stories. It can carry people. It can carry our stories from the region."

The DigitalArt4Climate competition featured more than 200 NFT artists from 58 countries. Bricx was the only Southeast Asian artist in the competition. His NFT, titled *Nexus*, won first place.

"Hand, plastic, wood. It symbolises forest fires and global warming. The hand is mine," he says. "I drink energy drinks from plastic, so I am also part of the problem. That is why the title is 'Nexus'. It is a self-portrait. I am contributing to pollution."

In early 2022, he became involved in regional storytelling campaigns, including the ASEAN Centre for Biodiversity's Young ASEAN Storyteller programme. "They really supported mainstreaming biodiversity. I am very thankful they gave a chance to people like us. I am not from an environmental background, so support from different stakeholders matters. ACB helped me find a way to carry the advocacy," he says.

When *The ASEAN* spoke with Bricx, he was racing to meet a deadline to finish an artwork for a climate change exhibit. His digital painting features the Tamaraw, a dwarf wild buffalo endemic to Mindoro in the Philippines and considered a critically endangered species. Its population drastically dwindled due to hunting, poaching, disease, and habitat loss. The Philippine government and the private sector have launched a Tamaraw conservation programme. In 2025, Bricx was inducted as a Tamaraw Conservation Ambassador.

In his artwork, a Tamaraw is engulfed in flames, depicting anger at policy failure and the lack of governance for climate action. "That is the symbolism of the tamaraw spirit. The tamaraw, even though it is cute, is highly territorial. It becomes even more defensive when it has a calf."

"Lately, I have been drawn to animals," he says. "In the field, I learned about kinship, about seeing nature as one. When I see an animal, it feels like a message." Bricx shares his new goal is to become a forest ranger.

Still, he admits that the path is not always stable. Despite his packed schedule, opportunities to work full-time in the field remain limited. At times, he is unsure whether he will be able to put food on the table. Even so, he keeps going.

"When you see people in the field and in communities doing the same thing, that empowers you. Especially with the youth," he says. "Even though we do not have a science background, we try to do what we can."

He treats every conversation with decision-makers as a rare opportunity. "Every time I have a chance to talk to leaders and policymakers, I bring up empowering communities, including Indigenous communities and youth," he says. "They will not see (what I post in) my Instagram; hence, that is my chance to speak to them."

As we end our conversation, he offers a message to young people doing similar work: keep going. "One of the important things I have learned is to continue what you are doing. Even if you do not believe in yourself, some people may see you as an inspiration."



Keeping Green from Turning Grey

Gretel Seet

Coordinator, Global Youth Biodiversity Network Southeast Asia



Ixora Tri Devi

Staff Writer, *The ASEAN*
Analysis Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural
Community Department

Gretel Seet Jia Xuan (25) is the Coordinator of the Global Youth Biodiversity Network Southeast Asia. Her interest in biodiversity began at the Festival of Biodiversity, organised by the Singapore National Parks Board. There, she discovered that Singapore is not only a concrete jungle but also home to a wide variety of species and habitats.

That curiosity deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when online talks made expert knowledge feel closer and more accessible. Watching biodiversity practitioners at work, she thought, "If they can do it, maybe I can too!"

From afar, the field of biodiversity can seem technical or remote, but for Gretel, it brings her real joy. After earning a Bachelor's degree in Business and Environmental Science, Gretel is eager to keep learning and to advocate for biodiversity across the region.





COP16

CALI • COLOMBIA
Paz con la Naturaleza

Youth



Gretel Seet delivering an opening statement at the youth pavilion at COP16, 2024

"I live near a small patch of forest, and over the years, more and more trees are being cut down," Gretel told The ASEAN when asked about what makes biodiversity loss feel real to her.

Gretel knows there are bigger cases that often dominate public attention.

"There are many other typical answers like Clementi Forest and Holland Plains of greater ecological importance and are being developed, but both small and big conservation cases play an equal role in the education of biodiversity. One has ecological significance, while the other tends to have greater sentimental value for those who live near it. It depends from person to person how they resonate with the space."

Witnessing environmental degradation daily heightened the sense of urgency. "The urgency pertaining to reducing biodiversity loss came from seeing these places being lost over time due to development." Even with the scale of the problem, individual action still matters, she notes. "Though this is a systemic issue, we can do our part day by day to reduce biodiversity loss."

"I understand the need to safeguard our national interests, but it's still sad to see that the spaces near your home get less green and more grey."

These concerns also matter at the regional level. "Southeast Asia is also home to a variety of biodiversity hotspots, our culture and way of life are linked to it too," Gretel adds.

On conservation work, Gretel shares that her focus has shifted to spreading knowledge about biodiversity.

"I used to deal with the human-wildlife conflict aspect, but now I mainly focus on mainstreaming biodiversity," she says, describing it as "helping people from all walks of life understand the importance of reducing biodiversity loss and make talking about biodiversity part of people's everyday life."

"It's a bit unconventional as most people associate working in the field when it comes to working on reducing biodiversity loss," Gretel says, "but in order for transformative change to happen, biodiversity loss has to be worked on from all sides and angles."

Her role in the Global Youth Biodiversity Network (GYBN) supports that ambition through coordination across countries.

"The GYBN is the youth constituency for the Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD). It is a youth-led organisation with a focus on four aspects: capacity building, policy advocacy, alliance building, and mobilising change."

Across Southeast Asia, the work centres on supporting chapters in the region, building capacity, and connecting local efforts to regional and global networks. "I mainly focus on assisting in the creation of new chapters and liaising with the global and regional chapters," Gretel says.

Gretel's ultimate goal is to make biodiversity more inclusive and accessible for all. Working with young people keeps that goal grounded and gives her a steady sense of optimism.

"Youths are not only the leaders of tomorrow but also the leaders of today," she says. "We are the ones who would be living the consequences of the decisions made today."

To young people across ASEAN, Gretel adds, "Though the future seems tough, remember how far you have come, and you deserve to exist in that space."





Stamping Out Illegal Wildlife Trade

The Philippine Postal Office on the Front Line



Joanne B. Agbisit

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Over a million pangolins were trafficked in a decade, making them the world's most trafficked mammal

Illegal wildlife trade is a major driver of biodiversity loss. Conservationists note that most trafficked species are already endangered or at-risk. Poaching and trafficking these species accelerate their depletion and damage the ecological balance.

In the Philippines, illegal wildlife trade costs the country roughly 50 billion Philippine pesos (about a billion US dollars) a year, according to the Asian Development Bank. The Philippines is not only a source but also a destination and transit point for trafficked fauna and flora, as well as their parts. They wind up as exotic pets, food delicacies, components of traditional medicine, or ornaments.

As the national postal service provider, the Philippine Postal Corporation (PHLPost) is on the front line of the Philippines' efforts to curb the illegal wildlife trade.

"PHLPost is very committed to safeguarding the integrity of the postal system and supporting national and international efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade through strong collaboration with other agencies, including law enforcement agencies,"

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PHLPost is very committed to safeguarding the integrity of the postal system and supporting national and international efforts to combat illegal wildlife trade through strong collaboration with other agencies, including law enforcement agencies.

says Lorie Ann B. Hinacay, acting chief of the PHLPost's Inspection and Investigation Division.

She explains that the Philippines' Bureau of Customs (BOC) marks and segregates suspicious inbound international packages and sends them to the PHLPost Central Mail Exchange for secondary inspection. The process involves X-ray scans and manual inspection of suspicious packages in the presence of authorised BOC and PHLPost personnel.

“(For example,) through strong collaboration with the BOC, we discovered 245 plastic tubes full of black ants from Poland (in 2022). We discovered these through X-ray,” she says.

Between 2021 and 2025, BOC and PHLPost have also confiscated other trafficked animal species, such as iguanas, black and white tegu lizards, rubber ducky isopods, bearded dragons, and beetles.

“Once they (live animals) are detected, all are properly turned over to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). For smuggled plants, they are turned over to the Bureau of Plant Industry. These are placed in quarantine,” says Ms. Hinacay. “It's the DENR, in cooperation with law enforcement agencies, that goes after

the trafficker. The role of the PHLPost is to provide support in the form of documentary evidence.”

PHLPost also thoroughly scrutinises outgoing packages. “Our local post offices, our frontliners, especially postal tellers, are equipped when it comes to accepting mail. We have 1,200 post offices nationwide, and we have our main sorting centre, the Central Mail Exchange, located in Pasay,” says Ms. Hinacay. “Each post office has a list of prohibited items. Our Inspectorate Department, of which I'm part, conducts inspections and (checks for) compliance.”

“There was one instance (when) perpetrators tried to smuggle tarantulas. We conducted a fact-finding investigation because it got past the local postal teller. But we were able to catch the package before it left the Philippines through our Central Mail Exchange, which has a strict security process,” says Ms. Hinacay.

PHLPost's efforts to implement strict security protocols are paying off, with the Universal Postal Union set to award Gold Certification for S58 and S-59 Security Standards certification to PHLPost. The certification indicates that PHLPost meets internationally recognised security standards for screening and securing international mail.

Ms. Hinacay points out, that combating wildlife trafficking is a multi-agency and multi-sectoral effort.

To be more effective, she says, a centralised interdiction database is needed to facilitate the tracking and identification of trafficked wildlife.

Tougher penalties must also be imposed against perpetrators. “Currently, there is an inter-agency effort to develop a national policy on addressing illegal wildlife trading, including stronger sanctions,” she says.

Ms. Hinacay likewise calls for greater involvement of privately run courier companies in curbing wildlife trade. She says they must implement stricter guidelines and accept greater accountability to prevent perpetrators from using their services for trafficking.

PHLPost is also strengthening its international network. She notes, “We actively participate with TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, an international illegal wildlife trade monitoring network that is based in Malaysia. We participate in regional dialogues, training programmes, intelligence sharing.”

Beyond enforcement, PHLPost highlights the need for an effective and sustained public awareness campaign to enlist communities as active partners in the fight against illegal wildlife trade.



Cute and coveted—rubber ducky isopods are increasingly targeted by illegal wildlife traders

Photo Credit: ©Suriyapong Koktong / iStock Photos

Shifting Currents

INSIDE ASEAN'S INNOVATION ENGINE

The ASEAN Plan of Action on Science, Technology, and Innovation (APASTI) serves as the region's strategic blueprint, leveraging STI to fuel the ASEAN Economic Community. Its mission is fourfold: building robust innovation ecosystems for MSMEs, enhancing talent mobility for researchers and youth, solving global challenges like climate change, and fostering a "science-aware" public culture.

If APASTI is the vision, the ASEAN Committee on Science, Technology, and Innovation (COSTI) is the executive engine that brings it to life. COSTI translates high-level strategy into actionable regional projects, providing oversight through nine specialized Sub-Committees—ranging from Biotechnology to Sustainable Energy.

By managing the ASEAN Science, Technology, and Innovation Fund (ASTIF), COSTI ensures that resources are directed toward the region's most critical priorities. Together, this partnership creates a seamless pipeline from policy to practice, ensuring that Southeast Asia remains competitive and resilient in an increasingly tech-driven world.

Embracing Unity in Science

Gifted ASEAN+3 Youths Race Against Climate Change in Siem Reap



Oeurn Savann

*Chief Officer, General Department of Science, Technology & Innovation, Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology & Innovation Cambodia
Committee on Science, Technology and Innovation (COSTI) Cambodia*



In the heart of Cambodia, where the ancient stone spires of Angkor Wat reach towards the heavens, a different kind of monumental effort recently took place. The vibrant city of Siem Reap served as the backdrop for the 10th ASEAN Plus Three Junior Science Odyssey (APT JSO-10), held from 22 to 26 July 2024. This prestigious annual event brought together 194 participants, primarily gifted middle and high school students aged 13 to 15, from across the ASEAN region and the "Plus Three" nations of China, Japan, and South Korea.

Hosted and organised by Cambodia's Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology & Innovation (MISTI) in collaboration with the ASEAN+3 Centre for the Gifted in Science (ACGS), the odyssey was far more than a classroom extension. Under the urgent theme "Racing Up Against Climate Change," these young minds embarked on a five-day journey designed to stimulate intellectual curiosity and foster the international friendships necessary to solve the planet's most pressing environmental crises.

Kanchana Wanichkorn, Director of Sectoral Development Directorate at the ASEAN Secretariat, said that this year's event is a significant milestone for ASEAN Member States and the ASEAN+3 countries.

She added that it provides a stage for youth to collaborate in science and technology, encouraging the sharing of knowledge and experiences to prepare them for future roles as competent engineers and scientists.

"Embracing curiosity, collaboration, and a commitment to advancing science and technology, we join forces with the ACGS (ASEAN+3 Centre for the Gifted in Science) to empower students, educators and communities to become change-makers for our world's pressing needs," she said.

Soo-Young Lee, Programme Director of the ACGS, said that since its inception in 2010, ACGS has been dedicated to offering diverse programmes for gifted science students and teachers in the ASEAN region.



"This year, we aim to provide an unforgettable experience. The enthusiasm shown by each country in the student camp and teacher workshops is truly heartening," he said. "We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the ASEAN countries for sending their national delegates to this event."

Exploring Cambodia's wonders: A cultural foundation for science

The choice of Siem Reap was intentional. As Dr. Nhim Khemara, Permanent Secretary of State for MISTI, noted in his opening address, the city is "home to one of the oldest and grandest civilisations in the world," offering a wealth of heritage that parallels the scientific ingenuity the program seeks to inspire.

For many participants, the immersion into Cambodian culture was transformative. Akari Htun Linn, a student from Myanmar, was struck by the hospitality and the majesty of the surroundings. "My first impression of Cambodia is that the streets are really clean, and the Cambodian volunteers were really friendly," she shared. The visit to the historic site of Angkor Wat was a lifelong dream realised. "I have always wanted to visit Angkor Wat since I was young because it is a one-of-a-kind

historic building... I took a lot of pictures, and I really love Angkor Wat."

This cultural appreciation served as a bridge, connecting students before they dove into rigorous technical challenges. The programme's philosophy used a "Romduol Flower" emblem (Cambodia's national flower) to symbolise this unity, with its three petals representing the "Plus Three" nations and ten green dots signifying the ASEAN Member States.

Inspiring the next generation of innovators

The core mission of the APT JSO is to challenge the intellectual capabilities of gifted youth and motivate them toward careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). This year, the focus was squarely on the Climate Risk Index, an issue Dr. Nhim Khemara described as an "existing reality that impacts us all".

Throughout the week, students participated in a multidisciplinary curriculum that featured intensive lecture courses on climate science, the greenhouse effect, and water resource management. They gained hands-on experience through lab experiments, such as the JAR TEST, which allowed them to simulate water treatment processes and determine



optimal chemical dosages. Additionally, institutional visits to the SRWSR Chreav Facility provided valuable real-world context for water purification and distribution, further enhancing their understanding of environmental challenges and solutions.

For Ham Mutita, a 14-year-old student from Cambodia, the odyssey was an opportunity to find her voice. "What inspired me to join was that I wanted to have more education on science," she explained. "Sometimes I have bad communication skills, so I wanted to come here to improve... and learn how to share science with others."

Similarly, Bon Matthew E. Singayao from the Philippines found his career path narrowing into focus. "I have learned more about climate change, water management plans, and how to treat water," he said. "This experience has... inspired me to focus on microbiology and possibly become a doctor in the future."

Collaborative challenges: Beyond borders and barriers

The hallmark of the APT JSO is its mixed-country team format. Participants were intentionally placed in groups with peers from different nations to work on



pitching projects. This forced students to navigate language barriers, differing educational backgrounds, and the sheer complexity of their assigned topics.

The Pitch Presentation Competition featured 18 groups tasked with identifying a problem related to climate change and proposing a creative solution using handmade posters. ChuChu Zheng, a 14-year-old from China, found herself tackling the environmental impact of the fashion industry—a topic she initially knew little about. "I needed to search a lot on the internet, translate, and spend more time preparing," she admitted. "But I just reduced my free time and asked my teammates and teachers for help. Everyone needs to work hard."

Her dedication paid off. Her group, Group H, ultimately secured the Gold Medal in the Pitch Competition for their project on "Fashion's Dirty Laundry" and eco-friendly alternatives.

Singayao also recalled the initial "stump" his team faced when addressing fast fashion. "How are we going to address the issues... because it's just so different from what we prepared? But we overcame it with pure determination and a lot of research." He emphasised that this diversity was their greatest strength: "You get one innovative solution with multiple parts combined into one."



A global vision for a sustainable future

As the odyssey drew to a close, the focus shifted from competition to a collective "Call to Action." In a symbolic gesture of their commitment, participants engaged in a Tree Planting Initiative within the Angkor Complex, with each nation planting trees to contribute to carbon sequestration and the local ecological balance.

The Awarding Ceremony honoured participants' accomplishments with distinguished recognition from Minister Hem Vandy of MISTI. Among the top accolades, Indonesia Group 1 received the Gold Medal in the Video Competition, while students from Singapore, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Brunei earned Gold in the Quiz Competition. The prestigious Overall Top Performer Gold Trophy was awarded to Antari Femida Nariswari from Indonesia.

However, the leaders of the event were quick to note that the medals were secondary to the awareness raised. Dr. Hul Seingheng, Under Secretary of State for MISTI and Chair of the ASEAN COSTI 2024, expressed his confidence in the prospects of these "junior scientists." "I expect these kids to excel in their knowledge... Their passion will guide their future education and career paths," he said.

The students left with a shared sense of responsibility. Seoyoung Park from South Korea reflected on the power of starting small: "Simple actions like conserving electricity and reducing pollution can contribute to larger environmental goals."

Akari Htun Linn summed up the spirit of the odyssey with a message for her peers: "Try their best to be the future scientists of our world. We should collaborate together for a bright future."

Conclusion

The 10th ASEAN Plus Three Junior Science Odyssey proved that while climate change is a global "race," it is not one that any nation can win alone. By embracing unity in science, the gifted youth of the ASEAN+3 region have laid the foundation for a network of innovators who see borders not as barriers, but as opportunities for collaborative ingenuity. Against the silhouette of Angkor's majestic structures and ancient history, these young scientists have begun writing a more sustainable chapter for the future of the planet.

How Scam Ready ASEAN

is Helping Communities Respond to Online Fraud



Fatima Alifha
*Senior Communications Officer for
Scam Ready ASEAN*

From the moment we wake up until we fall asleep, we spend much of our time staring at screens. The line between our digital and physical lives has all but blurred, shaping how we work, study, communicate with loved ones, shop, and even commute each day. Yet this convenience comes with vulnerability. The same access that connects us also opens doors for scammers.

Spotting the dangers

At least once, many of us have experienced spotting a scam, becoming a victim, or seeing a friend or loved one getting scammed. We hear these stories so often that they begin to sound familiar, like daily weather warnings or traffic updates that blend into the background of our routines. But when we look at the numbers, the scale is far from ordinary. According to the Global Anti Scam Alliance (GASA) State of Scams in Southeast Asia 2025 report, losses from scams in the region reached 23.6 billion US dollars in 2024, and the report highlights that many cases remain unreported.

Scams now pose a regional threat, not only because ASEAN citizens are frequently targeted but also due to the presence of global scams centers located within the region. These centres exploit victims from all corners of the world, ranging from online fraud to more serious forms of human trafficking. Addressing this threat has become a shared responsibility across ASEAN.

Behind these numbers, scams affect people in very different ways depending on where they are in life. Youth may be drawn into game-related offers that circulate through gaming communities and chat groups, promising quick rewards but quietly leading to lost money or hijacked accounts. Job seekers may encounter bogus employment offers that promise quick interviews or overseas placements, only to be asked to pay registration fees, provide copies of identity documents, or share bank details before a formal contract is issued. Working adults, overwhelmed by long hours and financial pressure, may be tempted by easy loans or attractive investment returns that promise a quick way out. Even our elderly loved ones are targeted, receiving convincing messages from people posing as relatives in distress.

Beyond financial loss, scams leave lasting effects. Accounts are compromised, reputations are questioned, trust within families and communities is strained, and the emotional impact often lingers long after the money is gone.

With online scams growing in scale and sophistication, the challenge is no longer whether people can spot the obvious red flags, but whether they are

prepared to respond when deception becomes harder to recognise. This growing urgency has been recognised at the regional level. As outlined in the Joint Media Statement from the 4th ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting held in Singapore in February 2024, ASEAN established the Anti-Scam Working Group as a platform for its Member States to strengthen cooperation on capacity building, training, and information sharing to combat online scams across digital and telecommunications channels.

The seriousness of the threat has since intensified. Hence, in September 2025, ASEAN Member States adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Combating Cybercrime and Online Scams, reaffirming shared commitment to address this growing regional threat, including enhancing law-enforcement coordination, public awareness, and cross-border cooperation. This momentum carries into the Philippines' ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026, which comes amid heightened regional concern over online scams and their cross-border impacts.

Turning commitments into action

The ASEAN Foundation, with a grant of 5 million US dollars from Google.org, is rolling out the Scam Ready ASEAN programme. First announced at the Global Anti-Scam Summit Asia in Singapore in September last year, this 2.5-year programme will kick off this year through a series of key activities designed to help ASEAN communities protect themselves and one another from online scams. It is delivered through practical initiatives that reflect how people actually encounter scams, combining gamified learning experiences with community-based training. These two approaches form the core of the programme, supported by broader policy engagement, shared learning resources, and grassroots outreach across the region.

As scam attempts become more frequent, many people no longer respond with alarm. We scroll past suspicious messages, delete unfamiliar links, and assume that experience alone will keep us safe. Yet this growing familiarity is precisely what scammers count on. When scams start to feel routine,



readiness has to mean more than caution. It requires understanding how these schemes work, practising how to respond, and knowing when to look out for one another before real damage is done.

This sense of confidence, however, can be misleading. According to the State of Scam Report, 78 per cent of adults in the region believe they can recognise scams, yet nearly two-thirds have still experienced one. This gap between confidence and experience highlights how quickly scams evolve, often designed to look familiar, legitimate, or trustworthy.

One key initiative under the programme is the Be Scam Ready Game (bit.ly/BeScamReady_AF). Through role-play scenarios based on real scam patterns faced by different age groups, the programme aims to reach three million users. Players navigate a range of challenges and receive feedback on their confidence and skills in detecting scams at the end of each storyline. Grounded in inoculation theory, which builds resistance by exposing people to weakened and simulated scam tactics in a safe environment, the game allows users to experience how scammers exploit emotions, urgency, and trust without real-world consequences.

Complementing this digital approach is a strong emphasis on learning through communities. Working with local

implementing partners, the programme will train 2,000 Master Trainers to support learning among 550,000 people, including youth, teachers, parents, educators, caregivers, and the elderly. These sessions are designed to move beyond awareness, helping participants practise how to respond to scams and discuss real experiences in familiar, trusted settings.

According to Dr. Piti Srisangnam, the Executive Director of the ASEAN Foundation, this combination of practice and community support is essential.

“In today’s digital environment, recognising a scam is only the first step,” he said. “People also need the confidence to pause, question, and respond, especially when scams are designed to look legitimate or familiar. Scam Ready ASEAN brings learning into everyday contexts, helping communities build confidence together rather than facing these risks alone.”

To support learning at scale, Scam Ready ASEAN will also develop and localise anti-scam learning materials through a centralised online Resource Hub. Developed with experts and made available in local languages, the platform will be open to the public and serve as a shared space for reliable information, practical guidance, and learning resources.

At the policy level, Scam Ready ASEAN will convene nine policy dialogues at

regional and national levels, bringing together scam experts, civil society organisations, universities, government officials, relevant ASEAN Sectoral Bodies, and youth leaders. These discussions will inform policy briefs that synthesise key insights and offer data-driven recommendations to strengthen responses to online scams.

Beyond institutions, the programme recognises the power of everyday voices. Through grassroots awareness and community outreach, the ASEAN Foundation will work with nano- and micro-influencers, as well as local advocates and key opinion leaders to localise awareness campaigns and promote a culture of mutual care, where people actively look out for one another and share practical ways to stay safe online.

As scam attempts continue to worm its way into daily online interactions, readiness is no longer just about spotting what looks suspicious. It is about how people respond when messages feel familiar, offers seem plausible, or pressure arrives at the wrong moment. Scam Ready ASEAN responds to this reality by grounding readiness in shared practice, learning, and collaboration across communities and institutions. In a region as diverse and connected as ASEAN, staying scam-ready is not something done alone. It is something built together, over time.



ASEAN ENTITIES

A Brief

ASEAN Entities are accredited organisations that have been formally recognised by ASEAN for their commitment to support the regional bloc's principles, goals, and initiatives. Article 16 of the ASEAN Charter specifically states: "ASEAN may engage with entities which support the ASEAN Charter, in particular its purposes and principles."

To qualify for accreditation, an organisation must be non-profit in nature, have existed in ASEAN for at least two years, hold a registered office in an ASEAN Member State, and have members coming from a relatively even spread of the ASEAN Member States.

Once accredited, ASEAN Entities enjoy several privileges, such as the use of the ASEAN name, emblem and flag, and an opportunity to tap into the ASEAN Project Cooperation framework. In turn, accredited entities are required to act in accordance with ASEAN's aims and fundamental principles, and to respect the laws and regulations of the ASEAN Member States in which they operate.

At present, there are 81 organisations accredited as ASEAN Entities. These

organisations are in the following sectors: a) business organisations, b) civil society organisations, c) think tanks and academic institutions, d) parliamentarians and judiciaries, e) other stakeholders.

For more information on ASEAN Entities, please read:

ASEAN. (2007). *Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*. ASEAN Secretariat. <https://asean.org/asean-charter/>

ASEAN Entities Digital Platform. <https://entities.asean.org/accreditation-process/rop/>

ASEAN. (n.d.). *ASEAN entities (Annex 2)*. ASEAN Main Portal. <https://asean.org/who-we-work-with/asean-entities/>



ASEAN ENTITY

BEYOND BORDERS

How the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship Shapes Futures Through Education and Experience

Maybank Foundation

What if a scholarship did more than fund an education? What if it helped shape perspective, strengthen regional understanding, and quietly prepare young people to give back to where they come from?

In a region as diverse and dynamic as Southeast Asia, the future of ASEAN depends not only on economic growth or political cooperation, but also on people who are educated, adaptable, and grounded in their own communities. The ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship reflects this belief. It is a purposeful investment in human potential, one that goes beyond academic achievement to

nurture regional exposure, professional readiness, and long-term contribution.

Established through a partnership between Maybank Foundation—an accredited ASEAN entity—and the ASEAN Secretariat, the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship is designed to support high-potential students from across ASEAN in pursuing tertiary education within the region. More importantly, it creates a pathway for scholars to return with knowledge, skills, and experience that can contribute meaningfully to their countries, organisations, and communities.

A scholarship with a regional perspective

Unlike many traditional scholarships, the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship incorporates regional exposure as a core element of its design.

Each scholar is required to pursue an undergraduate course of study outside their home country, but in another ASEAN Member State. Through this experience, scholars are exposed to different education systems, cultures, and social environments across the region.

Living and studying in another ASEAN country broadens one's perspective. Scholars learn to navigate new environments, appreciate different viewpoints, and adapt to unfamiliar settings. These experiences build confidence, cultural sensitivity, and openness, qualities that are increasingly important in today's interconnected world.

While the academic journey spans borders, the intention is not to draw talent away. Instead, it is to enrich scholars with experiences that they can later apply in meaningful ways within the region.

From education to professional practice

A defining feature of the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship is its clear emphasis on supporting scholars as they transition from education into the professional world.

Upon completing their studies, scholars serve a bond by taking on professional roles either within the Maybank Group or across relevant ASEAN offices and regional networks. Through these placements, scholars begin their careers in environments that allow them to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world settings that are relevant to both national and regional contexts.

This structured transition from education to employment provides stability and direction for young graduates. It enables scholars to grow professionally while contributing to organisational objectives, national development priorities, and regional cooperation.

Over time, scholars develop as professionals through their work experience. Some may progress into leadership roles within Maybank or the ASEAN network, while others may later pursue opportunities in different sectors after fulfilling their bond. Regardless of where their careers lead, they carry with them regional exposure, professional discipline, and a strong sense of responsibility shaped by their scholarship journey.

Developing professionals who give back

The ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship is guided by a simple principle: education should enable contribution.

Scholars are selected not only based on academic excellence, but also for their potential, resilience, and motivation to grow. Throughout their studies and early careers, they develop technical knowledge, professional skills, and personal confidence.

When scholars take on roles within Maybank Group or ASEAN offices regionally, they bring more than qualifications. They contribute new perspectives, share knowledge gained from their regional exposure, and apply diverse approaches to problem-solving. In doing so, they strengthen teams and organisations while building their own professional capabilities.

In essence, the scholarship benefits not just the individual recipients but also drives organisational growth through knowledge transfer and capability building.

Supporting quality education and sustainable development

The ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship supports the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education, which promotes inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities.

By enabling access to tertiary education across ASEAN, the programme helps develop human capital essential to sustainable economic and social progress. It also supports Sustainable Development Goal 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth through structured employment pathways, and Sustainable Development Goal 17 on Partnerships for the Goals through collaboration between regional institutions and the private sector.

These outcomes reflect a practical approach to sustainability, one that links education directly to employability and contribution.

Aligned with ASEAN's Socio-Cultural Vision

The scholarship aligns with the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) Blueprint 2025 and the newly launched ASSC Strategic Plan, both of which indicate a strong commitment to human

capital development, people-to-people connectivity, and a stronger sense of ASEAN identity.

By encouraging students to study within the region and contribute professionally through regional and national roles, the programme supports ASEAN's aspiration to simultaneously narrow development gaps and foster mutual understanding within and among Member States. Scholars build regional awareness through study, work, and daily interaction across cultures and markets. The sense of connection and community thus becomes a lived experience rather than abstract ideals.

Why this matters for the region?

ASEAN's strength lies in its diversity. Harnessing that diversity requires people who are comfortable working across cultures, open to learning, and capable of contributing within complex, interconnected environments.

The ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship helps nurture such individuals. It does not promise instant leaders or predefined outcomes. Instead, it provides opportunity, exposure, and structure, allowing scholars to grow into their roles over time.

By investing in education that is connected to professional practice and regional engagement, the programme supports a balanced and sustainable approach to talent development.

Maybank's role in enabling the journey

With a presence in 10 ASEAN countries, Maybank is well-positioned to support this initiative. Through Maybank Foundation, scholars gain not just financial support but also opportunities to launch their careers within the Maybank Group's regional network. The ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship reflects Maybank and ASEAN's shared long-term commitment to developing a pool of talent within the region.

The views and opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent the policy or official position of ASEAN.

No Consumers Left Behind



Agus Catur Aryanto Putro
Technical Advisor, Consumer
Protection in ASEAN II Project, GIZ
Indonesia and ASEAN



Maulani Rotinsulu
Secretary General, ASEAN
Disability Forum

“

When I shop at the supermarket, I struggle to tell cooking oil from soy sauce or detergent from disinfectant. The packaging is almost identical. I also can't make out expiry dates on food items.

Walin Hartati, visually impaired consumer and member of the Indonesian Association of Women with Disabilities (HWDI)

Inclusion as a buzzword has grown louder in recent years. While inclusive progress has already been made in some sectors, such as public service or transportation, attention should also be paid to inclusion in the private sector. Businesses have to promote inclusive business practices, which means intentionally integrating marginalised individuals into the value chain of the company at various levels.

Discussing inclusive business practices requires us to go beyond hiring quotas or disability-friendly facilities. It means building systems that integrate people of all conditions and backgrounds into every level—as suppliers, employees, and, crucially, as consumers. It involves developing inclusive product design and packaging, accessible digital interfaces, and

customer service infrastructure that accounts for all types of consumers. It also means recognising persons with disabilities not only as beneficiaries, but also as consumers with the same rights and expectations as other consumers and treating them without discrimination.

There is a pressing need for inclusive business practices. Research has shown that consumers with disabilities exhibit loyal behaviour to products or services if these meet their needs. As a result, businesses that implement inclusive practices or treat consumers fairly typically gain a good reputation. Far from being a cost burden, inclusion becomes a competitive advantage—one that enhances brand reputation, consumer trust, and ultimately, profitability.

When businesses cater to the specific needs and preferences of marginalised consumers, they empower consumers to make informed, independent choices. It also helps prevent unfair treatment by businesses. Consumers have the right to access accurate, updated, and unbiased information about the products and services they purchase.

Barriers remain

The road to inclusion still faces numerous challenges. Despite the progress made, inclusion remains more promise than practice. One obstacle is the absence of adequate laws and regulations. While some ASEAN Member States have introduced laws on persons with disabilities, provisions on business/consumer-related matters need to be strengthened. Similarly, consumer protection or competition laws have not yet adequately entrenched inclusive practices that protect consumers with particular needs or disabilities. Without effective laws and regulations, no one will assume responsibility to implement inclusion.

Uncertainties and limitations in the regulation have some major consequences for businesses. As businesses are not incentivised to apply inclusive business practices, they are not duty-bound to implement inclusion in their chain and, at times, even create barriers for consumers with disabilities. Walin Hartati's comment, made at the Regional Workshop on Inclusive Business Practices organised by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) in Bangkok in February this year, is an example of how businesses have failed to provide distinct and accessible packaging and labels to help consumers with disabilities differentiate between products.

E-commerce businesses also tend to prioritise aesthetic over usability in their platforms. Eye-catching images or audio-visual content are displayed without any accompanying texts or subtitles. In addition, some businesses only offer limited channels of communication to consumers; for example, customer care is available exclusively by phone. For many consumers with visual or hearing impairments, these challenges make shopping frustrating when it should be enjoyable.

What about compensation when things go wrong? In case consumers receive products that are not as promised or advertised, or worse, damaged, consumers may seek refund, repair, or return. As one of the core principles of consumer protection, complaints from consumers should be handled in a timely manner in accordance with the laws on consumer protection. When consumer complaints are not solved, consumers may escalate their complaints to dispute settlement bodies, such as the court or mediation agencies. By far, complaint handling and dispute resolution mechanisms—whether phone-based hotlines, in-person service desks, or court and alternative processes—are rarely designed with accessibility in mind.

In the online marketplace, new challenges are already emerging and likely to be more prevalent. Businesses should promote transparency and truthfulness, yet some of them still provide inaccurate information, such as by not disclosing the potential harmful side effects of products to consumers. One challenge is the proliferation of “dark patterns”—deceptive design strategies that manipulate users into choices they might not otherwise make, such as unintentionally subscribing to a service or purchasing add-ons. These are particularly harmful to consumers who rely on assistive technologies and may not have access to full contextual information.

Equally concerning is the rise of algorithmic decision-making, where users are steered towards specific products based on opaque data models. While personalisation may enhance convenience, it apparently narrows one's choices and raises serious ethical questions about autonomy and transparency. Consumers must be able to understand and contest the digital

systems that influence their purchasing decisions. In fact, consumers have the right to choose from a variety of options and to speak with companies about applicable terms and conditions..

Breaking the barriers

Dismantling all these barriers must begin with a top-down solution. Lawmakers should introduce and enforce legislation that balances inclusive business practices with the needs of consumers with disabilities. Understanding this as a crosscutting issue, lawmakers and governments are urged to work across sectors and mainstream inclusion in all line ministries instead of working in silos. Once the laws and regulations are available, enforcement should be taken into account with more commitment.

Meanwhile, businesses must commit to universal design principles—for products, services, packaging, and digital platforms. They must ensure that accessibility is embedded from the outset and not retrofit as an afterthought. Additionally, businesses should be encouraged to offer consumers a variety of communication methods in pre-sales, during sales, and after-sales. More importantly, user-testing should include persons with disabilities, and feedback mechanisms must be meaningful and ongoing.

Accessible complaint handling and dispute resolution are a must. Businesses should make it easy for consumers to seek recompense and should have various communication channels where consumers' needs and preferences can be addressed. Meanwhile, governments must ensure courts and mediation systems are inclusive and navigable for everyone. Redress systems must be accessible, timely, and equitable—a critical element in building long-term consumer trust.

Moreover, to be more transparent, businesses should commit to providing accurate information about the products they sell in stores and online. They should also avoid using any dark patterns and algorithmic decision-making that will mislead and limit the choices available to consumers. Businesses should also refrain from imposing a “take it or leave it” policy on consumers and offer room to negotiate the terms and conditions that may apply.



Photo Credit: ©CandyRetriever / iStock Photo

Collective responsibilities

Governments and businesses are indeed the key players, but they cannot do it alone. Civil society organisations, including consumer associations and organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) must serve as the watchdog. Their nature and longstanding experience in the grassroots make them essential partners in ensuring that the regulations and their implementation support inclusive practices. Through strategic partnerships with government agencies and the private sector, these groups can monitor progress, raise awareness, and help design solutions that are grounded in lived experience. They can also provide direct support to consumers, offering guidance in resolving disputes and advocating for systemic change.

In the ASEAN context, these strategic partnerships on inclusive practices shall be initiated by the ASEAN Committee on Consumer Protection through the implementation of the upcoming ASEAN Strategic Action Plan on Consumer Protection 2026-2030.

The drive for human rights

Ultimately, upholding the inclusion principle and translating it into action requires a concerted effort. Governments, businesses, consumer associations, OPDs, and all relevant actors should work together to ensure that no consumer is left behind, since translating policy into practice requires political will, commitment, and collaboration. Existing references such as the ASEAN Enabling Masterplan 2025 and several sectoral documents, including the ASEAN Guidelines on Consumer Protection in E-Commerce and ASEAN Guidelines on Unfair Contract Terms (UCT), should serve as a guide for ASEAN Member States in mainstreaming the rights of persons with disabilities, including consumers, in business-to-consumer relations. These references and recommendations can shift people's perspective towards pursuing inclusive business practices as an investment rather than merely a cost. Inclusive business practices are not just charity or corporate social responsibility; they are a commitment to protecting and fulfilling human rights.

The ASEAN-Germany cooperation project "Consumer Protection in ASEAN II (PROTECT II)" is commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. The project runs from 2023 to 2026. Working in partnership and guidance of the ASEAN Committee on Consumer Protection (ACCP), PROTECT II strengthens regional and national consumer protection systems. It aims to empower consumers, promote inclusive business practices, and contributes to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2025 by addressing the challenges of increasing cross-border and digital transactions.

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Building Trust Across Borders

Lao PDR and Viet Nam Deepen Consumer Protection



Khang Nguyen
*Regulatory Reform Attaché,
UK Mission to Viet Nam*

Officials from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce of the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) walked into the headquarters of the Viet Nam Competition Commission (VCC) on 28 August 2025 with a clear mission: to strengthen consumer protection systems across borders at a time when online marketplaces, cross-border trade, and consumer expectations transform faster than laws can keep pace.



The two-day exchange, part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-United Kingdom (UK) Economic Integration Programme (EIP), brought together government officials, civil society actors, and market inspectors. The discussions centred on the question: How can Lao PDR and Viet Nam ensure that consumers—from farmers buying fertiliser to young people shopping online—stay protected in a borderless marketplace? This event, building on recent bilateral ties, highlights how regional cooperation addresses shared vulnerabilities in a rapidly digitising economy.

Why consumer protection matters now: A regional perspective

Consumers across Southeast Asia face new challenges. Online fraud, unsafe products, and misleading advertising have risen alongside booming e-commerce industry. In Lao PDR, as in Viet Nam, the growth of digital trade is also a double-edged sword, creating opportunities but opening vulnerabilities. For example, the e-commerce market in ASEAN is projected to reach 106.72 billion US dollars in revenue by 2025, according to *Statista*. Yet, this expansion has fuelled a surge in scams, with the

Asia-Pacific region losing an estimated 688 billion US dollars to fraud in 2024 alone, as *Fortune* reports. In Southeast Asia, cyber scam operations have evolved into a transnational crisis since the COVID-19 pandemic, often involving counterfeit goods crossing borders, per the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime.

ASEAN sought to tackle these challenges through the ASEAN Strategic Action Plan for Consumer Protection 2016–2025 (ASAPCP), which calls on Member States to strengthen laws, enforcement, and consumer education. The Lao PDR–Viet Nam exchange in Hanoi brought this vision to life, translating high-level commitments into concrete cooperation. The two countries' stronger ties in consumer protection underscore the urgency, with governments collaborating amid rising digital threats.

Learning from Viet Nam's experience: Legal instruments and civil society practices

Lao PDR delegates were oriented on Viet Nam's amended Law on Protection of Consumer Rights (No. 19/2023/QH15), promulgated in June 2023 and effective

from July 2024, which introduces stronger safeguards for e-commerce. These safeguards include compelling digital platforms to be transparent and handle complaints swiftly. It also enhances protection for vulnerable groups, such as those with disabilities, pregnant women, older persons, and children.

The delegates also learned how NGOs complement government enforcement from the Vietnam Consumer Protection Association (VICOPRO), Viet Nam's largest consumer association. They discussed sustainable funding models, advocacy campaigns, and how to empower consumers to speak up. VICOPRO, with 54 provincial branches, runs initiatives, such as apps for reporting issues, to boost consumer awareness nationwide.

For many Lao PDR officials, these lessons were immediately relevant. "We are refining our own Consumer Protection Law from 2010, and seeing Viet Nam's practical systems gives us concrete models to adapt," explained Santisouk Phounesavath, Director General of MOIC's Internal Trade Department, in a post-event discussion.



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Photo Credit: ©UK Mission to ASEAN

Consumer protection in real-time

One highly impactful moment came at Long Bien Market, Hanoi’s iconic wholesale hub. Amid the bustle of vendors unloading fresh produce and traders haggling over prices, Lao PDR delegates joined Vietnamese inspectors for real-time checks.

Inspectors demonstrated how to monitor food safety, verify labels, and issue warnings for non-compliance. The Lao PDR team witnessed mobile technology in action, logging results for national databases—a stark contrast to their paper-based systems. “Seeing how Viet Nam integrates technology into inspections helps us imagine similar tools in Lao markets,” one participant reflected, highlighting the peer-learning value.

Shared challenges, shared solutions: Multi-stakeholder insights

The exchange sparked deeper conversations from various angles on consumer protection in digital trade.

- E-commerce growth: Both countries acknowledged risks like counterfeit goods. Viet Nam shared platform engagement strategies, drawing from

its laws’ requirements for quality of service and transparency.

- Consumer education: VICOPRO emphasised campaigns on financial literacy and online safety, noting scams cost Singapore businesses 1.2 million US dollars in late 2024 on phishing incidents alone, per GBG.
- Enforcement coordination: Viet Nam’s multi-level system offers a model for Lao PDR that aligns with ASAPCP goals.

The role of regional and international partnerships: A broader lens

This exchange stemmed from the ASEAN-UK EIP’s Regulatory Reform Pillar, which has supported frameworks across Southeast Asia since 2024. “Our partnership with ASEAN Member States is built on knowledge-sharing and peer learning,” said Zoe Dayan, Senior Regulatory Reform Attaché at the UK Mission to ASEAN. “This is part of ensuring protected consumers and fair markets.”

ASEAN Secretariat representatives noted bilateral efforts to harmonise standards, preventing any state from lagging behind.

Looking ahead: Future perspectives

The Lao PDR delegation returned with tools and partnerships. The Ministry of Industry and Commerce officials will incorporate the insights they gained into legal refinements. Future steps include developing joint training programmes and digital platforms.

As one Vietnamese participant concluded, “Consumer rights don’t stop at the border. Neither should our cooperation.”

The ASEAN-UK Economic Integration Programme supports regulatory reform, trade facilitation, financial inclusion and inclusive growth across ASEAN. Through technical assistance, capacity building, and peer-to-peer partnerships, the programme is helping to strengthen consumer protection frameworks and market surveillance systems across the region.

The author is a Regulatory Reform Attaché at the UK Mission to Viet Nam. He specialises in public digital infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and consumer protection across Southeast Asia.

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2025 ASEAN Art Residency Programme

"The Little Beetle's Journey"



Ixora Tri Devi

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Analysis Division, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Department



The ASEAN Secretariat initiated the ASEAN Artists Residency Programme (AARP) in 2018 to nurture and support the region's young and upcoming artists. The programme has since featured several artists from across Southeast Asia.

In 2025, the ASEAN Art Residency Programme (AARP) returned with a special edition that coincided with the Osaka Kansai World Expo. Lao PDR artist Souphalak Phongsavath, known as Luck, was selected as the resident and spent a month in Osaka. She received a dedicated space in the ASEAN Pavilion to produce a new artwork. She also led botanical printmaking workshops in Osaka, Japan and Jakarta, Indonesia.

Luck shares her experience of the residency and her journey in art with *The ASEAN*.

As a child, Luck always wondered how the fresh cow dung that dotted the path on her way to school in the morning could vanish by afternoon. She soon learned that it was not magic that cleared her way. It was the work of tiny dung beetles. When Luck was studying at school, these beetles worked tirelessly, rolling dung balls hundreds of times heavier than their bodies.

"Beetles are quiet creatures. They seem to whisper from under the ground. If we do not listen well, we will not hear them. They work in silence, they work in their own way, but their work is good for the environment, it is good for the soil," says Luck.

While her hometown, Xayaboury in northern Lao PDR, is renowned for its elephant conservation centre, it was these tiny dung beetles that caught

Luck's fascination. They became the inspiration behind her work in the ASEAN Art Residency Programme 2025. She calls the concept "Whisper from the Earth," and "The Little Beetle's Journey" is part of this.

In Vientiane, Luck works as an artist and curator at an art gallery that welcomes locals and long-term foreign residents who want to share and explore art. She learned about the residency programme

from fellow Southeast Asian artists. "I thought it would be difficult because it was open to the whole country, but I applied anyway."

Soon after she received the good news of her acceptance into the programme, she turned her workshop into a small studio. Luck invited friends to visit, share experiences, and offer suggestions. For this project, she chose to use natural, plant-based materials.

"My friend made handmade paper from banana trees and gave me some of it. She said, 'you can create anything you want from it.' I thought to myself, how can I make something from this paper? I tried to bring it into my concept, the beetle and the charcoal. After many experiments, I found a method that worked," she explains.

From imagination to reality

Growing up in Xayaboury, Luck was surrounded by mountains, forests, and rice fields. One of her favourite activities was foraging for mushrooms and bamboo shoots with her siblings and cooking them at home. Her father was an accountant, and her siblings later followed in his footsteps. Luck, however, always wondered if there was a life beyond a desk job.

"One day, I followed my mother to the temple to make offerings. That was the first time I saw the temple murals. I wondered how the artists painted them. It looked amazing," Luck recalls.

Luck was seven at that time. When they returned home, she excitedly asked her father what the person who did the mural was called. Her dad said they are called ຜົດຕະກອນ, *chit ta kone*, which means "painter" or "visual artist."

"This word is beautiful to me. My dad explained that it means people who work to express the thinking into reality. In my hometown, no one really uses the word, especially as their occupation. They have police, farmers, staff, but this kind of job nobody did it."

Her curiosity carried her into visual art during secondary school. She went to

an art vocational school in Savannakhet before continuing her art education at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Vientiane.

Her academic journey seemed smooth until her final years of college, when she found out that she was allergic to substances used in printing materials. During printing class, she felt sick all the time, and her face even turned yellow.

"I could not taste the food, I could not eat, and I needed to be hospitalised," she says.

After learning about her allergy, Luck chose to work with more natural materials.

"I went back to basics, like drawing, then developed into other things like multicoloured and dry pastel. I used everything that did not have a strong smell," she adds.

This became part of her routine, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown when art supply stores were closed.

"During COVID, we cooked every day. In the kitchen, I saw my sister using charcoal. It is black, and I thought I might be able to use it. I did not let my sister know that I was using these materials from the kitchen. I used stones and a mortar to crush things into powder."

Luck later proved that her sister's sacrifice of her kitchen supplies was not in vain. After the pandemic, she held her first solo drawing exhibition. Her second exhibition, a charcoal exhibition, soon followed.

Her decision to use natural materials has become her signature in mixed-media works, including the piece she created during her AARP 2025 residency. Looking back on this opportunity, Luck hopes to see more activities and collaborations among ASEAN artists.

"In ASEAN, we have many artists who are very good. ASEAN can be a platform for us to share opportunities and news about art. We have a rich culture, and our art is charming. When you visit a place and move a little, you can already see a different culture, even in Lao. But we still



Souphalak Phongsavath facilitates a printmaking workshop at the National Gallery of Indonesia on 31 October 2025, as part of the 2025 ASEAN Artist Residency Programme (AARP)

do not really know how to preserve our art," Luck assesses.

Luck also says she remains optimistic about the future of young ASEAN artists, even as artificial intelligence becomes more prominent in the creative industries.

"AI is coming into our lives, but we can use it in a good way. Artists are not always good at writing, so maybe AI can help with that. For creation, I think we need to experience our culture in a deeper way, not only what we can find online or on social media. If you feel something in front of you that you can touch, you can feel that comes from your soul, from your spirit. AI can tell you information, but you need to go to that place to bring out your soul."

As our conversation closes, Luck remembers how she often lost her way in Osaka during her residency. Although it was challenging, she carries those moments as sweet memories.

"For an artist, it is good when things are not too comfortable. We need to remember the challenges and commit them to our memory. Later, you can say this happened to me, and you can feel the emotion."

Luck's artwork, "The Little Beetle's Journey", is now part of the ASEAN Gallery in Jakarta, alongside works by earlier AARP residents.



*The Indian Mission to ASEAN spearheads the launch of *The Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy* at the ASEAN Headquarters/ASEAN Secretariat on 8 September 2025*

Book Feature

THE MANGO FLAVOUR

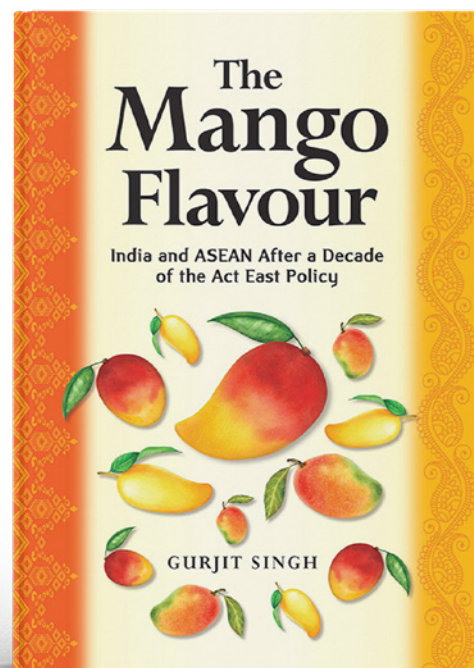
by Ambassador Gurjit Singh

The *Mango Flavour: India and ASEAN After a Decade of the Act East Policy*, written by India's former Ambassador to Indonesia and ASEAN, Ambassador Gurjit Singh, explores three decades of ASEAN-India relations and the evolution of India's Act East Policy. Drawing from Ambassador Singh's diplomatic experience, he examines how this policy has shaped cooperation with ASEAN along the political-security, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Speaking at the book launch, Ambassador of India to ASEAN Srinivas Gotru, said: "His book reflects the journey that we've had so far and challenges us to think about the road ahead and how India and ASEAN can strengthen engagement especially in a year that's shaped by shifting power dynamics, challenges on climate, digital transformation and rising aspirations of our people."

Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for Community and Corporate Affairs Nararya Soeprapto noted: "Tracing back the remarkable journey of ASEAN-India partnership, it is evident that the partnership has grown rapidly and comprehensively over the years, since India's formal engagement with ASEAN as a sectoral partner. ASEAN-India cooperation has steadily evolved, upgrading to substantive, meaningful, and mutually beneficial strategic partnerships across diverse areas of the corporation."

Like a mango tree, ASEAN-India partnership should be tended and savoured, DSG Soeprapto added. This will ensure that cooperation will bear fruit and deliver mutual growth and prosperity.





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This collaboration reflects the shared commitment of ASEAN and India to disseminate knowledge and information on socio-cultural development in ASEAN.

The ASEAN

Short-finned pilot whales plying the waters of the Ombai-Wetar Strait in Timor-Leste

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