

*What's Up invited local wildlife activist
VILMA D'ROZARIO to reply to our reader's question...*

Q: How can I become a climate activist?



Climate activist Greta Thunberg has inspired many young people like our reader.
[Photo: Anthony Quintano]

From: Julia, Pri 6, CHIJ Our Lady of Good Counsel

Ever since I knew about Greta Thunberg [↑](#), I agreed with what she said. But, not everybody is listening. The Earth is dying but all we care about is money, money, and money.

I want to be a climate activist. My teacher told me that I will need to collaborate with people from other countries because Singapore is very small. And, if Singapore is eco-friendly, it only affects a small part of the earth. But, I still want to do it.

I know being a climate activist is not easy. Sometimes, you might be criticised by others, but I want to take up the challenge to save the earth. If no one saves the earth, we would all die. Climate change is worsening because of human activities. The only question I have is, how do I even start and collaborate with other climate activists?

A: Step by step, work with others to save the planet

From: Vilma D'Rozario, wildlife activist

Dear Julia,

It is good news to me that you want to become a climate activist one day. I am a wildlife activist. Whether you are a climate change activist or a wildlife activist, you want to make a difference. Climate affects wildlife. Those who care about the climate usually love nature — so, you and I have something in common. I did not become a wildlife activist overnight though. The way I describe it is as a journey from appreciation to activism. Along the way, different experiences made me the activist I am today. Let me show you what I mean.

Appreciating: My journey started very early in life. Even as a little kid, I loved the outdoors! My parents were nature lovers, and they encouraged my brother and me to enjoy watching birds and insects in the garden. When I was in primary school, we went on family trips to Kuantan and Fraser's Hill. That was when I started loving the sea, hills, and especially forests.

Exploring: When I grew up, I became a teacher. Then, I went to the United States (US) to study psychology. As a university student, I would go by bus to different national wildlife parks. I was sad to return to Singapore because, at that time, I thought there was so little wildlife here compared to the US! But, I soon found out that we do have a lot of nature here, too.

I became active in the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS). We went for nature walks every weekend. That was when I realised how much biodiversity we have in Singapore. You could say I found my place at that point — this is where I want to be, and this is what I should be doing!

Teaching and learning: One day, NSS asked me to lead a group into a Brunei forest. I had never led a group on a forest trip. But, I agreed. A local nature activist there guided us. From such trips, I really learnt a lot about wildlife and about what activists do.

I also do biodiversity surveys. For example, I help NParks (National Parks Board) to take stock of biodiversity in Singapore. The survey data helps us to plan how to help nature.

My next big step as an educator was co-founding Cicada Tree Eco-Place with a group of good friends. We taught kids and their families about nature, biodiversity, and conservation.



Vilma D'Rozario surveying wildlife in Johor. She is currently director of SWAG. You can find out more about her work at swagcatsg.wixsite.com/mysite.
[Photo: Sabrina Jabbar]

Protecting: Through our work, we came across an organisation called MYCAT (Malaysian Conservation Alliance for Tigers). We partnered MYCAT in tiger conservation. We brought people from Singapore over to Malaysia to go on CAT Walks, patrolling areas where **poachers** might be.

Our presence in the forest kept poachers away. When we found animal traps, we told the wildlife authorities who would remove them. Then, the pandemic struck! We could not go to Malaysia.

Some of us CAT Walkers from Singapore wanted to do more for tigers and also other wildcats of the world. And so, we got together and started SWAG, the Singapore Wildcat Action Group. SWAG raises awareness of wildcat conservation through regular events, such as our Wildcat Lecture series, and Singapore Tiger Week. We also recruit volunteers to take direct action to protect wildcats and their habitats.

Fundraising: SWAG raises funds for MYCAT. We do this by having an annual charity dinner, and by organising a virtual challenge. Last year, a group of Swaggers ran (or walked) 100km each to raise funds for MYCAT. And, something very good came out of it. MYCAT uses the money to hire Malaysian **indigenous** people to patrol their

forests. This is a great arrangement. These patrol officers know the forests better than any of us. Plus, they benefit from the income.

Speaking up: Accepting leadership roles gives you a great way to share your views. I chaired the education group of NSS for some years and was a board member of the Jane Goodall Institute (Singapore), too. These are committees that speak up for wildlife.

In addition, I attend talks between government agencies and nature groups to plan for Singapore being our best “City in Nature”. I know I can get my voice heard at the meetings. Together, we make decisions about how best to protect wildlife.

Reaching out: Now, after over 20 years of volunteering, I spend a lot of my time doing outreach. We do, for instance, webinars on wildcats. SWAG recently launched a campaign to share about our very own critically-endangered local wildcat, the leopard cat! You can find out more from our Facebook at www.facebook.com/SingaporeWildcatActionGroup/

Julia, can you see how one thing led to another during my journey? We don't become activists overnight. Also, activism can be done in so many ways. When you work with like-minded people, great ideas are born!

Sincerely,
Vilma D'Rozario

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VOCAB BUILDER

indigenous (say “in-di-ji-nes”; adjective) = native or originally from that place.

poachers (say “po-cherz”; noun) = people who illegally catch or kill wild animals.