Source: *The Straits Times,* pA7
Date: 3 December 2020

SINGAPOREANS VS THE PANDEMIC
PART 2 OF 6

An important measure to prevent future pandemics is to avoid further destruction of our natural ecosystems

Professor Koh Lian Pin, who is part of the Emerging Stronger Taskforce, is helping to draw up the blueprint for Singapore's green aspirations and economic recovery. PHOTO: NICKY LOH

After 16 years abroad, prominent conservation scientist Koh Lian Pin has returned to tap new areas for economic growth, to help Singapore emerge from the Covid-19 crisis stronger, and greener

By Tee Hun Ching

As countries went under lockdown earlier this year, stories about nature staking its rightful claim on planet Earth brought some cheer to a world spooked by a deadly disease.

Professor Koh Lian Pin, however, was hearing some troubling reports: Desperate to make a living, some folks in developing nations were resorting to poaching and putting certain species under threat.

"Although there were positive stories about cleaner air and wildlife reclaiming their space, the Covid-19 situation has also resulted in higher impacts on the ecosystem," said Prof Koh, who helms the new Centre for Nature-based Climate Solutions at the National University of Singapore (NUS). The prominent conservation scientist returned to Singapore in March under a National Research Foundation scheme, after spending 16 years working in institutions across Australia, Switzerland and the United States.

Prof Koh, 44, is well-attuned to the perennial tussle between protecting nature and safeguarding livelihoods. After all, his job includes weighing the environmental costs of economic growth in crafting approaches that inform Singapore's policies and decisions on climate challenges. The worst public health crisis in a century has unleashed a global economic bloodbath. It is hard for people to worry about the planet's health when they are fretting over their next paycheck.

But while the exact origin of the novel coronavirus remains a mystery, Prof Koh said: "There is little doubt that an important measure to prevent future pandemics is to avoid further destruction and degradation of our natural ecosystems and to reduce our exposure to wild sources and vectors of zoonotic diseases." Unsustainable farming, mining and forestry practices often damage and encroach upon nature, driving wildlife into contact with people.

Blueprint for going green

Increasingly, countries are aware that charting a green path forward is critical to their recovery – and the world's survival.

A *New Nature Economy* report said the pandemic is a wake-up call for the world to "change the way we eat, live, grow, build and power our lives to achieve a carbon-neutral, 'nature-positive' economy".

Singapore is heading in the right direction as it works to rebound from the Covid-19 crisis. It has targeted sustainability as one of the key areas of economic growth, and an industry-led group was tasked by the Emerging Stronger Taskforce in June to quickly develop and execute concepts for this sector. Other such coalitions – called Alliances for Action – have been set up to do the same for areas including robotics, e-commerce and education technology.

The focus on sustainability, as well as environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards, is set to grow in the post-Covid reality. More investors are using ESG criteria to evaluate potential investments, which the Sustainability Alliance sees as a chance for Singapore to develop related solutions and services to meet its own needs as well as global demand.

Prof Koh, a well-known researcher in the field of sustainability and environmental science, is helping to draw up the blueprint for the city-state's green aspirations. He is part of the Emerging Stronger Taskforce, which was set up to guide the country's economic recovery from the pandemic.

Prof Koh aims to develop win-win solutions that are "scientifically sound, economically feasible and socially acceptable". PHOTO: NICKY LOH

The new centre he heads focuses on harnessing nature to help fight climate change. Solutions include the conservation, restoration and improved management of forests, wetlands and agricultural lands so more carbon dioxide (CO_2) from the atmosphere can be absorbed by plants and soils and stored as organic carbon. This process is known as carbon sequestration.

Such cost-effective land management strategies, says Prof Koh, can save up to 11 billion tonnes of CO_2 a year globally. Cutting CO_2 – the main greenhouse gas driving global warming – in the atmosphere would help mitigate the effects of climate change and build climate resilience.

With the growing concern over climate change and sustainability, Singapore is also looking to position itself as a carbon services hub in Asia to generate new jobs and economic value *(see right, Emerging Stronger Together)*. The Sustainability Alliance has been market-testing various concepts, such as a one-stop solution for companies to measure, mitigate and offset their carbon emissions.

Prof Koh, Professor of Conservation Science, Technology and Policy in the Department of Biological Sciences at the NUS Faculty of Science, and his team are providing valuable scientific input to this push – nature-based solutions form a vital supply of carbon credits and are fast gaining traction in international policy and business. They are working on several research projects, which include mapping the climate mitigation potential and financial returns of such solutions across the region.

Singapore as a carbon hub

For example, they are studying the potential for cities around the world, including Singapore, to contribute to carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation by reforesting pockets of their urban landscape without compromising economic opportunities, housing and social needs.

It is clear from his CV why Singapore has worked to woo him back under the Returning Singaporean Scientists scheme. Named a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader in 2013, the old boy of Hwa Chong Institution was a Swiss National Science Foundation Professor at ETH Zurich and, later, the Chair of Applied Ecology and Conservation at the University of Adelaide in Australia.

Since his return, Prof Koh has been busy engaging stakeholders from the public and private sectors, educators and civil society to help turn the Little Red Dot into a green one. His goal is to devise win-win solutions that are "scientifically sound, economically feasible and socially acceptable".

He said, "The best policies and solutions will not work unless there is buy-in from an informed public that understands the hard decisions and compromises that will have to be made, as well as the new opportunities that our society can aspire towards as we emerge from this crisis not just stronger but also greener."

Emerging Stronger Together

To help individuals and businesses challenged by Covid-19, the Emerging Stronger Taskforce harnesses collective resources to help Singaporeans seize new opportunities.

One initiative by the Taskforce is the Alliances for Action, which are industry-led coalitions working with the Government to quickly prototype ideas in different areas of growth. Sustainability is one of them.

The focus on sustainability, as well as environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards, is set to grow in the post-Covid world, and there is room for Singapore to develop related solutions to meet its own needs as well as global demand.

For instance, nature-based solutions play a vital role in building climate resilience. When managed well, forests, farms and wetlands can absorb large amounts of greenhouse gases to offset carbon emissions and mitigate the effects of global warming. But such natural climate strategies are complex and under-utilised.

Leveraging on Singapore's robust policy framework and infrastructure, the Sustainability Alliance has identified ways to tap nature-based climate solutions as a new economic opportunity, and positioning itself as a carbon services hub is one of them.

Working with private stakeholders and government agencies such as the Economic Development Board and National Climate Change Secretariat, the Sustainability Alliance has been market-testing various concepts, including ways to verify and certify carbon credits. By building a holistic ecosystem involving the public and private sectors, it hopes Singapore can blossom into the Little Green Dot.

For more, visit emergingstronger.sg

This is the second in a six-part series on the resilience of Singaporeans, as they band together to seize new opportunities in a world changed by Covid-19.

Watch videos from this series

In partnership with

Emerging Stronger Together

SG TOGETHER