

How David Attenborough inspired fans and scientists during S'pore visit in 2006

Many of those who met the iconic presenter say encounter remains a treasured memory

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A conversation with Sir David Attenborough, the iconic presenter of countless natural history documentaries, was a life-changing moment for Singaporean Goplasamy Reuben Clements.

Unlike millions of others who have encountered Mr Attenborough's gentle voice narrating a TV show, Dr Clements heard it in person in 2006 when the presenter was in Singapore for a shoot.

"He encouraged me to go beyond Singapore's shores to pursue a career in conservation," said Dr Clements, then a 27-year-old National University of Singapore master's student in biology who presented Mr Attenborough with his publication featuring a snail species native to Malaysia's limestone karsts, which are porous rock formations, that was threatened by quarrying.

Today, Dr Clements works at the Zoological Society of London, where he develops long-term financing to protect wildlife habitats across South-east Asia. The society recognised Mr Attenborough in 1965 for his contributions to the understanding and appreciation of the scientific study of animals.

Mr Attenborough, who turned 100 years old earlier in May, made a huge impact on Dr Clements and others in Singapore on just that one trip here in 2006. He was filming

crab-eating snakes for *Life In Cold Blood*, a BBC nature series featuring reptiles and amphibians from 11 countries.

After a three-hour shoot at the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, the man who has been dubbed the "voice of nature" met a gathering of fans and volunteers from the National Parks Board (NParks), Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research – now renamed the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum (LKCNHM) – and NUS.

For many of those who met Mr Attenborough during the 2006 visit, their encounter remains a treasured memory and an inspiration – like meeting a hero, said Dr Joelle Lai from LKCNHM.

"As a child, I felt like I travelled through his documentaries. When my family wanted to go out, I would choose to stay at home to watch his shows," said Dr Lai, who is also a senior lecturer at NUS' College of Alice and Peter Tan.

She has watched all of Mr Attenborough's documentaries. "I highly respect his optimism about conservation, even after all these years," she said.

Mr N. Sivasothi, a senior lecturer at NUS' Department of Biological Sciences, who coordinated Mr Attenborough's 2006 visit, said: "His impact on that generation was truly immense, and many became career biologists in some way: in research, education or management."



Presenter David Attenborough during filming of *Life In Cold Blood* at the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve in 2006, with Mr N. Sivasothi, a senior lecturer at NUS, helping with the shoot. PHOTO: COURTESY OF GOPALASAMY REUBEN CLEMENTS



Dr Goplasamy Reuben Clements, then an NUS master's student, presenting Mr Attenborough with his publication featuring a snail species native to Malaysia's limestone karsts that was threatened by quarrying, during the 2006 visit. PHOTO: COURTESY OF GOPALASAMY REUBEN CLEMENTS

For Mr James Gan, NParks' principal researcher for forest ecology, meeting Mr Attenborough in 2006 was a childhood dream come true. When he was 14, his parents had gifted him one of Mr Attenborough's books, *The Living Planet*, which deepened his fascination with wildlife and inspired him to protect them.

Mr Gan helped ensure the mangrove swamp at Sungei Buloh was accessible for Mr Attenborough, who was then 80 years old. He recalls the TV personality looking as if he had stepped right out of the screen in his trademark blue shirt. Most of all, Mr Gan remembers

Mr Attenborough's attentiveness. "He was really speaking to and with me. I really felt that I was the only person who mattered at that moment," said Mr Gan, who was then a conservation officer at the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve.

The arrival of the natural history celebrity brought hope for Singapore, he added, noting that the country at the time was placing greater emphasis on conserving its natural biodiversity as a city in a garden.

Since then, Mr Gan has driven key conservation projects here, co-editing the third edition of the Singapore Red Data Book, which as-

sesses threats to local flora and fauna, and contributing to the resurgence of wild oriental pied hornbills from local extinction.

Following the 2006 shoot in Singapore, Mr Attenborough went on to highlight the Republic's greening efforts in the TV series *Planet Earth II*, and its wildlife in the six-episode *Wild City*.

For Ms Cynthia Lee, who was part of the team supporting the shoot and who volunteered to chauffeur Mr Attenborough to and from Sungei Buloh, the broadcaster remains a tireless inspiration.

"He could have just retired, but he still uses his influence to advo-

CHILDHOOD HERO

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DR JOELLE LAI, from the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

cate environmental protection and sustainability," said Ms Lee, who is now an administrative director at NUS, calling him her "scientific hero" and an educator of generations.

After work, Mr Attenborough showed a charming and personable side, she said, when he hosted a fancy dinner to thank a handful of volunteers and his crew at the revolving restaurant atop the former Mandarin Hotel.

To this day, conservation biologist Enoka Kudavidanage, who was an NUS doctoral student in 2006, keeps the photograph she took with Mr Attenborough during the visit on her bookshelf.

"It's something that reminds me that he made a difference to a lot of people," said Dr Kudavidanage, a professor at Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, whose work focuses on protecting elephants and leopards.

"I've been an academic for the last 26 years, and his way of speaking is something that I follow, because he speaks from the heart."

Dr Clements said of Mr Attenborough's advice to him to pursue conservation beyond Singapore: "I've never looked back since that little encouragement."

Dr Clements returned to the Malaysian forests where his passion for biology first took root, and subsequently landed his first role with national conservation trust WWF-Malaysia, where he managed a team to protect tigers in Perak through anti-poaching patrols and removing wire snares.

He and his wife also founded an environmental non-profit organisation called Rimba, which helped lobby for the establishment of Kenyir State Park that was gazetted in 2018. The move halted logging across 30,000ha of forests, roughly 40 per cent the size of Singapore, in the state of Terengganu.

Reflecting on Mr Attenborough's encouragement, Dr Clements said: "Those words were an added push because they came from someone of his stature."

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