Sun bears in the spotlight

Organisation hopes to raise awareness and funds to conserve the species

LIM CHIA YING

HOW many of us actually know about sun bears and that these creatures inhabit the jungles of Sabah?

It is true. The East Malaysian state is considered to be the last flourishing habitat for these mammals. However, focus on their diminishing numbers often takes a back seat compared to the attention given to species such as the orang utan and proboscis monkey.

The Environmental Education Alliance of South-East Asia (Easea) founder Kenny Peavy definitely thinks the level of awareness can be increased among people here.

“A lot of Malaysians don’t realise that there are sun bears in this country, or even bears in Asia for that matter.

“In the past, sun bears thrived all the way up to Thailand but it is sad how their numbers have diminished greatly to just a few fragmented areas in Peninsular Malaysia and Indonesia.

“We hope that this year’s Sun Bear Rock! event will help generate greater interest and understanding about this unique bear species among Malaysians,” said Peavy, 42.

Peavy is referring to his brainchild called Rockin’ 4 The Environment project, organised yearly in conjunction with Earth Day celebrations.

This year it takes the theme of Sun Bear Rock! and will be held from April 21 to 28 at the DoPPel Pel Kafe in Central Market Annex, Kuala Lumpur.

“The theme chosen is in accordance with the festival’s choice of endangered species to highlight for the year,” said Peavy, adding that this was the fifth year the festival was being held.

For its inaugural year, it was Turtle Rock! followed by Tiger Rock!, Orang Utan Rock! and Dugong Rock!

“It was meant to focus on the plight of the particular animal of that year, and we had talks dispelling information to the public.

“I’d like to think the festival has managed to pique much concern and curiosity which in turn helps to raise vital funds as well as the profile of environmental education-oriented NGOs in Malaysia.

“In the past four years, some RM55,000 were successfully raised, all of which were channelled to the respective organisations,” he said.

Peavy has pinned high hopes of achieving a further RM35,000 this year.

He added that Rockin’ 4 The Environment was meant to inject a fun take on the word “green” and biodiversity by combining arts, culture and music for the masses.

Activities include performances by school bands on April 21, a university invasion gig and showcase by students on campus, a performance by upcoming musicians called Sun Bear Rock! Open Mic, an acoustic showcase featuring some of Klang Valley’s top musicians and also an educational community outreach project at the International School of Kuala Lumpur and other schools.

There will be a bazaar, free concert and auction segment on April 28 that will bring together some of KL’s biggest names in the independent music scene.

For details, visit www.facebook.com/rockin4theenvironment

All proceeds go to Easea and the Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre, which is headed by Malayan sun bear researcher and conservationist Wong Siew Te.

Though Easea was launched this January at the Global Issues Network Indonesia conference in Jakarta, by its line-up of board members and advisers, Peavy said it still has not quite taken off as actively yet.

“I will only concentrate full-time on the organisation after my teaching job is over by June,” said Peavy, who now works as a science/ ecology teacher in school and has been living in Malaysia for over 10 years.

According to him, Easea will be a network comprising educators and concerned citizens to empower youths and communities with knowledge, attitude, skills and understanding of nature while also inspiring them into action and stewardship for a sustainable future.

“We accomplish this through professional development and training for community members, as well as an online networking forum.

“It is time for Malaysians to learn about their environment and take charge, than to leave it to the experts (to empower the people).

“It’s a new concept but I think Malaysians are ready. You can see the gradual change in people who nowadays prefer to stay in eco-friendly resorts with sustainable practices. With Easea, we hope to make conservation and green movements fun, accessible and interesting,” he said.

Hailing from Georgia, US, Peavy reminisces his growing up days where he was surrounded by farms and villages, and where he could run to forests and streams.

“I was always into outdoor recreational activities when younger.

“Sadly, a lot of things have changed from say, 30 years back, which wasn’t so long ago anyway. This has become an impetus for us to protect the environment even more.”
“Even if there are lesser green spaces in the urban city, people in villages have become more technologically-connected and savvy than before. It’s all the more reason to play less outdoors,” he added.

Besides Rockin’4 The Environment, another of Eeasea’s project is Green Riders: Southeast Asia, an inter-country cycling event to be held in July.

The idea for this bike ride is to film a series of videos highlighting the natural beauty of SouthEast Asia while conducting interviews with the locals, teachers and organic farmers on their green efforts.

Peavy said there are several efforts of individuals and communities who are quietly carrying out their own preservation work.

However, as many of them work in isolation, their work and ideas often go unnoticed.

“My friend Jamie Raskin and I hence thought of this novel way to shed light on these inspiring people and their creative work.

“The videos will be filmed as educational documentaries and posted them up on YouTube,” he added.

It will take about six weeks for them to complete their journey that starts from Phuket, Thailand, and through Malaysia and Singapore before finishing in Bali.

“We want to invite local cycling clubs to join us as active participants along parts of our route,” he said.

The recce was carried out in December but they are still looking to improve the route. He aims to cover between 30km and 100km a day, depending on the weather and difficulty of terrain.

“We’ll probably be on our bikes about 80% of the time, as it is not conducive to cycle to traffic-congested cities like Jakarta. That would mean using folding bikes and public transportation,” he added.

While they have found several sponsors for their meals and accommodation. Peavy hopes to raise funds through their bike ride to help cover their costs with remaining funds will go to EEASEA. (Universiti Putra Malaysia has offered to guide and sponsor the entire leg of the trip in Malaysia).

“More than just building networks, we are looking into designing a series of lessons to accompany the videos, which can be used by teachers and students as reference for their own conservation and social responsibility programmes,” concluded Peavy.

An enhanced version of this article was published on The Star iPad app on March 16.
Right at home: Peavy loves the outdoors and nature and he hopes to spread that love among more people.

Shy creature: A mole cricket that lives underground, and according to Peavy, South-East Asia has a wealth of unique flora and fauna such as this.
Noble cause: Unusual species as this is what Peavy and Raskin hope to be able to also capture and document throughout their bike journey from Indonesia to Thailand.

Doing their bit: Students from the International School of KL put up in a performance during the Orang Utan Rock! event previously.
Local support: Band Pop Shuvit rendering their support for the Orang Utan Rock! event.

Personal touch: Artiste Yuna singing a number in support of saving the orang utans during the Orang Utan Rock! festival two years back.