

**Acceptance Speech by Koh Kheng-Lian of Singapore, at the conferring
of the Elizabeth Haub Prize for Environmental Law**

14 November, Hotel Alpenhof 2013, Murnau

Excellencies

Professor Lindencrona, President of the Jury

Members of the Jury

**Dr. Wolfgang Burhenne and Amb. Amado Tolentino, Executive Governors
of ICEL,**

Mrs. and Mr. Haub,

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First, let me express my grateful thanks to the Elizabeth Haub Foundation and ICEL for awarding me the Elizabeth Haub Prize 2012 for my pioneering contributions to the development and evolution of environmental law in Singapore and the ASEAN region. I am particularly delighted that this occasion coincides with the Third International Symposium of Laureates of the Elizabeth Haub Prizes for Environmental Law and Diplomacy. This is double happiness and more as we are also celebrating the development of Environmental Law itself.

Compared with past Laureates who are world experts and have by far, more years of experience in the teaching, practice and research of environmental law, I am truly humbled and honored. Incidentally, I am an accidental environmental lawyer. Before my involvement in 1996 with the establishment of APCEL (Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law), by the Faculty of Law, NUS, in partnership with the then IUCN-CEL (now IUCN -WCEL), and supported by UNEP, I was teaching and researching in criminal law, contract, commercial transactions and also dabbling into Straits in International Navigation – the controversial Straits of Malacca – a highly debated issue at the United Nations Law of the Sea Conference (UNCLOS). Tommy Koh, one of the Laureats, was President of UNCLOS.

In my environmental law voyage, what was so exciting was that I started from zero and often without a compass! All I had at the beginning of my voyage and along the way was inspiration, support and encouragement from many Elizabeth Haub Laureates – to mention three in particular in alphabetical order - Parvez Hassan, Tommy Koh and Nick Robinson. They played a tremendous role in APCEL and

continues to do so. Parvez and Tommy are twin fathers of APCEL. Nick continues to be to be actively involved with APCEL.

My research on Singapore and ASEAN coincided with the period of their significant developments in environmental law. A few words on my research in these areas.

Singapore has come a long way since it was founded by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles in 1819 for the British East India Company. It became an entrepôt port and remained such until it gained independence and was a republic in 1965. From 1968 onwards – bulldozers were out in full force to prepare the land for industrialization and urbanization as it pursued the politics of economic survival, having been separated from Malaysia in 1965. It has no natural resources and its tiny island of about 710.3 sq km cannot always be seen on the world map – a tiny red dot.

Perhaps no other country in the third world has had such political will of greening and cleaning the environment at the start of an urbanization and industrialization process – no less than conceptualizing a ‘Garden City’ in Parliament on 16 December 1968 - the eve of its industrialization and urbanization programme.

The former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in his book, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965 – 2000: Memoirs* (Chapter 13, Greening Singapore, at 201), stated:

To achieve First World standards in a Third World region, we set out to transform Singapore into a *tropical garden city*. ... I concluded that we needed a department dedicated to the care of trees after they had been planted. I established one in the Ministry of National Development.

Today, it has morphed from a Garden City into a ‘City in a Garden’ (it means when you come out of your house you enter straight into a garden) –an aspect of Singapore’s concept of sustainable development – integrating its rapid urbanization and industrialization with an aesthetic quality of life.

Forty five years since 1968, it can boast of more gardens, including the world acclaimed Gardens by the Bay, which won the World Building of the Year, 2012. An invitation to all of you to come to Singapore, and I will show you our ‘City in a Garden’!

In the case of ASEAN, my research has traced its journey when environment was first introduced in 1978, with its first of a number of environmental programmes covering a wide range of environmental common issues. Since then, ASEAN has developed its ‘Vision 2020’ (1997) - greening and cleaning ASEAN - the target date was accelerated to 2015, to align it with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. With the ASEAN Charter 2007, environmental sustainability has been further advanced and ASEAN is now forging an integrated ASEAN

Community by 2015 and beyond. Indeed, over the last 35 years or so, ASEAN has been working towards achieving sustainable development and participating in efforts towards addressing global environmental challenges. These efforts have been captured in some of my publications, including *ASEAN Environmental Law, Policy and Governance*, in 2 volumes numbering over 2000 pages of selected ASEAN environmental instruments. Many of these are soft law instruments which are in line with the ASEAN Way (*musyawarah* - decision by consensus), mainly through soft laws and building confidence in a membership that is not homogenous in terms of political, economic, socio-cultural, language and other contexts. Although the ASEAN Way has its critics, yet as the world today finds it hard to agree on a hard law approach, some wisdom in the ASEAN Way is beginning to be appreciated.

Finally, I would like to thank the Law Faculty, National University of Singapore and its Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law (APCEL) for their support.

As I continue my environmental journey, I am greatly inspired by the visionary, gracious and generous Elizabeth Haub who has had a profound and tremendous impact the world over. It was just that one single step that has brought us all together here today.

Thank You

Emeritus Professor KOH Kheng-Lian
Faculty of Law, National University of Singapore;
Honorary Director, Asia- Pacific Centre for Environmental Law;

14 November 2013