Dr Jane Goodall: The making of a world-famous conservationist

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Dr Goodall at the question and answer session joined by her soft toy monkey “Mr H”, which reminds her of the indomitable human spirit

Dr Jane Goodall, world-renowned conservationist and UN Messenger for Peace, delivered the recent Asia Environment Lecture 2019 at the University Cultural Centre.

Titled “Living in Harmony with Nature & Wildlife”, the lecture was presented by the NUS Master of Science in Environmental Management (MEM) programme, the NUS Bachelor of Environmental Studies programme and the Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law (APCEL), and co-organised by the Jane Goodall Institute (Singapore) (JGIS).

Dr Goodall spoke fondly of her supportive and understanding mother who was prepared to help her develop who she was, and who she wanted to be.

Dr Goodall had crawled into a hen house when on holiday at a farm. As she waited for hours to observe how chickens laid eggs, a search was started for her. Instead of berating her when she re-appeared, her mother listened to the young child excitingly recount her discovery.

As a schoolgirl, she found her hero in a second-hand copy of *Tarzan of the Apes*. She dreamt of going to Africa and living with wild animals. Quipping that Tarzan “married the wrong Jane”, she invited laughter from the estimated 1,700-strong audience. The

audience included Deputy Prime Minister Mr Heng Swee Keat, Associate Professor Audrey Chia of MEM and Dr Andie Ang of JGIS — who had each delivered a speech before Dr Goodall took the podium.

Dr Goodall recounted her discovery that chimpanzees could break off grass stems to pull termites out of termite mounds — debunking the then-conventional notion that only humans could make and use tools

Dr Goodall did well in school. As her family could not afford her a university education, she enrolled in a secretarial course and found work. Then, a friend invited her for a holiday to Kenya. After waiting at tables for five to six months and saving enough for her trip, she embarked on her month-long voyage to Mombasa.

In Kenya, she met Dr Louis Leakey, a prominent palaeontologist who was the curator for Nairobi's natural history museum. She landed a secretarial job with Dr Leakey, whom she would accompany on his expeditions. It was Dr Leakey who encouraged Dr Goodall to study chimpanzees. When the authorities were reluctant to let a young woman go on her field study to the Lake Tanganyika region on her own, her mother accompanied her.

Insights into chimpanzee behaviour

It was on her field study that she encountered a chimpanzee that she named David Greybeard. She observed David Greybeard breaking off grass stems which it would use to pull termites out of termite mounds and removing leaves from a twig to make a better tool.

This observation challenged a then-conventional notion that only humans could make and use tools.

She saw chimpanzees as social, intelligent and emotional animals. Having different personalities, they could be caring but also capable of being brutal.

She also observed different mothering styles in her 60 years of study, primarily at Gombe Stream National Park. Supportive mothers tended to have offspring which performed better, with female offspring which became good mothers themselves and male offspring which fared better in the chimpanzee hierarchy.

Conservation work

Dr Goodall's encounter with a caged baby chimpanzee in a market in Kinshasa, and its confiscation by the authorities, led to the founding of her first sanctuary for orphaned chimpanzees. Her work in chimpanzee-range countries also made her see an inter-connection between poverty and environmental degradation.

In the 1990s, the slopes around Gombe were rapidly deforested as land was cleared for cultivation, which in turn caused soil erosion and siltation. Dr Goodall realised that, in order to save the chimpanzee habitat, she needed to look into livelihood concerns of the poor people living around Gombe.

The "TACARE" or "Take Care" programme was initiated to develop sustainable livelihoods with local inhabitants while promoting environmental protection. Today, the forests around Gombe have recovered significantly.

The evening ended with a collective pledge by Dr Goodall and the audience to do their part and save the environment: "Together, we can. Together, we will."

She travels 300 days a year to raise funds for conservation and to spread environmental awareness with people around the world. Dr Goodall mentioned a number of environmental concerns: destruction of the world's two great lungs of the forests and

oceans; reckless burning of fossil fuels; methane emission produced by intensive animal farming; unsustainable lifestyles; human poverty and population growth.

Yet, Dr Goodall has hope. She cited “the explosive development of human intelligence” and “the resilience of nature” as reasons for hope. Her third reason for hope was illustrated with “Mr H”, her soft-toy monkey that she had brought to the lecture.

The toy was given to Dr Goodall 29 years ago by Mr Gary Horn, a US Marine who went blind at 21. Despite the odds, Horn became a magician. “Mr H” stood for “the indomitable human spirit” and “the people who tackle what seems impossible”.

However, “we don’t have that much time,” Dr Goodall reminded the audience.

“We must get together and start healing this harm that we have inflicted, and we’ve got to do it now.”

Following her lecture, Dr Shawn Lum of Nature Society (Singapore) moderated a dialogue with Dr Goodall, when she also took questions from the audience.

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By Mr Pak-Juan Koe, MEM alumnus