

**Publication: The Straits Times Online**

**Date: 25 March 2022**

**Headline: These EcoFriends are adding new chapters to Singapore's sustainability story**

### **These EcoFriends are adding new chapters to Singapore's sustainability story**

From teaching people to repair broken electronics instead of discarding them, to leading net zero emissions drives, NEA EcoFriends are making great strides to green the Little Red Dot



When the Covid-19 pandemic started, Mr Veerappan Swaminathan and his team swung into action to keep his anti-waste community group, Repair Kopitiam, going.

It was founded in 2014 to teach people how to fix broken items – ranging from electrical appliances to damaged furniture – instead of throwing them away and buying new ones. Repair sessions normally take place on the last Sunday of every month, and members of the public are welcome to join in and bring in their items for repair.

Over the years, Repair Kopitiam has trained over 4,000 volunteer repair coaches who lead the sessions, which involve in-person outreach to communities all over Singapore. These efforts became difficult to accomplish once the pandemic hit, but that did not stop the team from finding new ways to continue their work.

Says Mr Veerappan: “The initial phase of the pandemic was tough as we were trying to recalibrate. Like what many had to do, we pivoted to online events, and invested in equipment and training to use those effectively.

“We also focused more on corporate outreach via LinkedIn as our primary social media platform where we published infographics on core sustainability issues, and found new areas of business in creating sustainability related content.”

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When Covid-19 safe measurement measures for events were eased, the repair meet-ups resumed – capped at 20 to 25 attendees per session with strict safe distancing practices. To further expand its reach, adds Mr Veerappan, the group “organised virtual Repair Kopitiam live streams that were viewed by thousands of people.”



The enterprising 36-year-old has also kept his foot on the sustainability pedal in other ways. As founder and director of sustainability consultancy firm Sustainable Living Lab (SL2), he led the company in producing its first Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) Gap Report last year.

It aims to show how Singapore's SMEs can shift its economy towards a more sustainable future. For example, the inaugural report, based on a survey of 201 local SMEs, found that only about a third of them knew of green finance initiatives to help them expand sustainably, leaving much room for improvement.

SL2 also joined Meta and tech industry association SGTech to launch eRevival Square, an initiative to raise awareness of Singapore's growing electronic waste (e-waste) problem. From July to December last year, the partners organised virtual and community activities such as an appliance collection and donation drive, and a challenge to upcycle or repair e-waste.

Mr Veerappan, who has also spearheaded other environmental efforts, received the National Environment Agency (NEA) (Non-Government Organisations and Grassroots Volunteers category) in 2016. He notes: “Earth may survive climate change and other man-made calamities that may occur. Humans, however, will not survive these changes. Sustainability, to me, is not about saving the Earth but about saving ourselves.

“And while we may be individuals, each of us has a circle of influence, whether it's family and friends, colleagues, employees or the larger community. Working with our circle to appreciate and protect the environment is a great first step for future EcoFriends to take.”



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Bringing about change from the ground up

Like Mr Veerappan, environmental advocate Yasmin Sim also added new chapters to her sustainability story during the pandemic.

Currently pursuing a degree in business administration at Singapore Management University (SMU), the 21-year-old has turned her attention to sustainable investing. As part of the executive committee of the SMU Impact Investing Club, she helps other students understand how they can steer firms and industries towards sustainable choices through their investments.

Ms Sim says: "Businesses have the potential to be changemakers because they implement policies that affect supply chains, and influence consumers' decisions. Investors can also persuade businesses to make changes for sustainability."



During the pandemic, she interned at several firms, helping sustainability projects for them as well. These included conducting a review of the carbon footprint of dishes offered by healthy food chain SaladStop! in 2020. The chain later used the report's findings to carbon-label its entire menu.

In April that same year, Ms Sim joined volunteer group Plastic-Lite Singapore, which aims to encourage the public to reduce its reliance on single-use plastics by conducting educational workshops, and now leads its social media team.

Her goal: To refine the group's social media strategy in hopes of "improving its outreach to businesses, schools and other stakeholders; ultimately, we want to grow the organisation into a more well-known one to achieve greater reach and impact".

Ms Sim's passion for greening the environment had taken root when she joined the environmental club in secondary school.

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In her first year at Ngee Ann Polytechnic in 2017, she not only revived the long-inactive BA Green Club at the School of Business and Accountancy, but also became its president and established a 10-member committee within six months. She then created the club's tagline "Sustainability in Business" and arranged company visits for fellow students to learn about best practices to help the environment.

"We wanted to inspire them to become future leaders who would spearhead their own sustainability initiatives in the organisations they would later join," she explains.



Under her leadership, the club coordinated beach clean-up sessions, upcycling workshops, and visits to events that covered plastic pollution, marine litter, water conservation and other sustainability topics to engage peers.

For her efforts at championing a variety of green initiatives, Ms Sim received the NEA Eco-Friend Award (Youth and Students category) in 2019.

Though she has felt demoralised occasionally, she still believes in the power of the individual to effect change. "When I restarted the BA Green Club, nobody wanted to be a part of it at first, because they saw it as just a club to pick leaves and do recycling," Ms Sim recalls.

"But you just have to keep doing what you believe in, and you will be the change that you want."

**Steering the future of sustainability**

When Dr Lee Hui Mien, Angela did her PhD in sustainable product development from 2003 to 2007, she was likely the first person to do so in Singapore.

Now, almost 20 years later, the 41-year-old is still breaking new ground in sustainability.

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Last year, she took up the mantle of senior director for group environmental sustainability at communications technology firm Singtel. Her responsibilities include developing its roadmap to achieve net zero emissions by 2050.

Dr Lee adds: "I'm looking at how to bring people along on our sustainability journey, creating collaboration opportunities for greener products and services, equipping our own workforce with sustainability related skills, and working with the business to accelerate sourcing for renewable energy."

She dived into a lifelong advocacy for sustainability at age 14, with environmental projects in secondary school, which earned her a National Youth Achievement Award.

During her time at Nanyang Technological University, she served on the executive committee of the NTU EarthLink club, initiating environmental activities such as beach clean-ups, nature hikes and recycling projects – for which she was a recipient of the NEA EcoFriend Award (Youth and Students category) in its inaugural year, 2007.

In her first job as a research scientist at the Agency for Science, Technology and Research, Dr Lee was part of the core team that set up the Sustainable Manufacturing Centre at the Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology in 2009, helping SMEs to adopt sustainable manufacturing. This included finding ways to use less or recycled materials, and to minimise emissions from the transportation of goods.

With her assistance, for example, local eyewear manufacturer and retailer Nanyang Optical developed eyewear frames made almost entirely out of recycled materials. The award-winning product enabled it to penetrate into eco-conscious European markets such as France and Italy.



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In 2013, Dr Lee became furniture giant Ikea's head of sustainability in South-east Asia. During her tenure, which lasted until 2017, she collaborated with the expansion team to create sustainable guidelines and goals for future stores, including a commitment to put solar panels and integrated waste management systems in every store.

She later brought the expertise she honed to her next role as vice-president for Sustainable Solutions at Mandai Park Development, and took charge of Wildlife Reserves Singapore's (now Mandai Wildlife Group) sustainability portfolio.

There, she led the development of the Mandai Environmental Sustainability Strategy, including the plan to reduce carbon emissions through sustainable transport such as the setting up of Electric Vehicle charging stations in 2018. When its first phase was launched in November 2020, Mandai Wildlife Reserves became one of the largest public EV charging locations in Singapore.

After over two decades in the sustainability space, Dr Lee is more optimistic about its future than ever before. "The pandemic has created challenges, such as single-use items creeping back into everyday life due to hygiene reasons, after much progress in getting rid of them. But it has also raised awareness of climate change issues," she notes.

"You see governments laying out plans for sustainable recovery, and more people wanting to make a difference for the environment. I don't think we've ever had this much attention on sustainability, and that gives me the hope and confidence that things will get better."

### **Having a Heart For Our Earth**

Mr Veerappan, Ms Sim and Dr Lee are all recipients of the NEA EcoFriend Awards across the years.

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Launched in 2007, the Awards recognises individuals who have made significant contributions to a clean and green Singapore. This year's Awards will be its 15th edition.

If you know someone with a Heart For Our Earth who has made a difference in our sustainability journey, nominate them for NEA's today!

For enquiries, write in to [ecofriend@star-horizon.com](mailto:ecofriend@star-horizon.com) or call 6884-9481.

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