



Dr Kalithasan (left) and Renuka giving an update of the Working Actively Through Education and Rehabilitation (Water) Project's progress.



The Sungai Way river clean-up volunteer activity which has resulted in improved water quality. — filepic

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# Having a heart for rivers

Local community engagement key to success of foundation's water project

THE effect is almost immediate – the smile on the students' faces upon seeing small fish in Bukit Kiara turns to disgust upon seeing the polluted waters of the Sungai Penchala source several kilometres downstream.

“Our open classroom takes the ‘heart’ approach by reconnecting people with nature,” said Global Environment Centre (GEC) River Care programme coordinator Dr K Kalithasan.

“It is important to take the civic science approach with the hope that the knowledge and skills we impart to them leads to action.”

The open classroom and Sungai Penchala Information Centre are among the activities under the Working Actively Through Education and Rehabilitation (Water) Project, which is a collaboration between GAB Foundation and GEC.

It focuses on river rehabilitation efforts, stakeholder engagement and education to engage and empower companies, government agencies and local communities to conserve rivers as an important water source.

“We launched the Water Project in December 2007 to rehabilitate the Sungai Way river in Selangor, which has a tributary running behind our factory,” said GAB Foundation trustee Renuka Indrarajah.

“It has since extended to include Sungai Kinta in Perak and Sungai Penchala in Selangor,” she added.

Renuka cited the improved water quality of Sungai Way as one of the project's success stories.

The water quality went from a Class IV to V level, where nothing



Participants and invited guests stop for a rest after looking for the source of Sungai Penchala. — filepic

can survive, to a Class III level, which can support some forms of aquatic life.

“Local community engagement is imperative to the project's success. We need to get people to change their mindsets and instil a sense of ownership in them.

“In addition, the project provides the community the tools they need to create their own projects.

“As a proper business model is needed to make the project sustainable, we also teach participants how they could turn waste into wealth,” said Renuka.

Dr Kalithasan said, “For example, youths are taught how to turn used cooking oil into soap and candle, while market traders are taught how to turn garbage enzyme into cleaning detergent.

“The Water Project has different activities targeted at different community segments.

“These include composting and herb garden, waste separation and recycling, as well as water testing, monitoring water quality and river protection.

“The open classroom is one of the best ways to teach people about

ivers and waters, because they get to see and hear for themselves the noise from the stream and flow of the river at its source.”

The River Care Education Centre serves as a public resource centre offering reference material on river management and test kits to conduct water quality testing.

Renuka, who is also Heineken Malaysia corporate relations and legal director, said more than RM4mil had been spent over the past nine years on the foundation's

flagship project under its environmental conservation pillar.

“The Water Project is a successful model of a public-private partnership initiative,” said Dr Kalithasan.

“It took 18 months to get everyone's buy-in, but we now have 11 government agencies sitting on the project's committee and their full support for the river rehabilitation efforts.”

For details or to participate in the Water Project and its activities, visit [waterproject.net.my](http://waterproject.net.my) or email [enquiry@gabfoundation.org](mailto:enquiry@gabfoundation.org)