

Reflections on Making a Difference

In this expanded editorial, the retiring editor-in-chief of *Nature Watch* sums up his attempt to make a contribution

Text and photos by **Morten Strange**

When I was born in 1952 we were 2.6 billion people on this planet. Today we are 7.0 billion, and the earth is one degree Celsius warmer because of that. We have more of everything, especially consumer stuff; the only things we have less of are clean water, clean air, forests, fish and interesting animals. We also have more knowledge—a lot more. We know our problems now: Al Gore, David Attenborough, Leonardo DiCaprio, and tons of other experts and Hollywood-types tell us about them every time we turn on the TV, or open up a newspaper or web page. What we are lacking is not knowledge, not even leadership, but a collective public will to fix the problems. Forest clearance, biodiversity loss, urbanization, meat consumption, fossil fuel production, and pollution—all this destruction is increasing every year. It always has, and it probably always will.

Does that mean there is nothing you can do about it? No. My mother spent over twenty years in the parliamentary system, teaching me from an early age that what we all do as individuals makes a difference. You can walk up the stairs instead of taking the lift. You can buy a hybrid car—if you can afford it—instead of a smelly gas-guzzler. You can eat less meat. You can eat less, period. You can borrow less and save more. You can buy less cheap junk you don't really need, and you can clean up after yourself. It won't change history, but it will make a difference.

I joined the oil business in 1974 because, firstly, at the time I believed that the world needed energy, and secondly, because I loved to work on the rigs. My employers paid me, but I would have done the work anyway (it's a good thing



After coming to Singapore in 1980 I started to work in Indonesia (among other places), particularly the incredible swamp forests near Tarakan, in the northern part of Kalimantan, Borneo. The pictures here are from a job in 1981. I cherished the view from the helicopter going into location. The Nipa Palm forests near the coast appeared to be endless in those days. Behind them stood the unbroken canopy of the swamp forest, sometimes completely waterlogged. We moved from well to well on bicycles across wooden boardwalks through the forest. There were no roads; all equipment came in by helicopter. I thought, *Wow, this place is special.* And yes, it did cross my mind when I looked at the older wells nearby: *Is this really what we should be doing with the forest?*

Most of my photographs from the 1980s and 1990s have long ago been replaced by much better modern material. But I don't think anyone ever got a better series of the Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes* than the one I published in *The 1993 Collection of Singapore Stamps*. Here is a close-up from the primitive hide I set up way out on the tidal mudflats near Lower Seletar Reservoir in April 1991. It is twenty years old, but it still looks all right.



they didn't know that!) Since I also loved nature, I eventually found my two passions somewhat difficult to reconcile.

I retired from the oil patch in 1986—I was 33 years old. I haven't worked in industry since and I never will. I am not saying this is right for everyone, but if you are doing some less than ethical work every day, maybe you should consider, if you can afford it, to change your profession and pursue a new one.

I didn't know what to do then,

so inspired by the late Clive Briffett I picked up an old hobby of mine: photographing birds. There were only two other bird photographers in Singapore then; there was also one in Malaysia and one in Indonesia. But most of the Sunda rainforest birds had never been photographed at all, so there was loads of work to be done, and it was all a lot of fun.

I have tried to be useful with little projects since those early days of my retirement from the oil industry—in



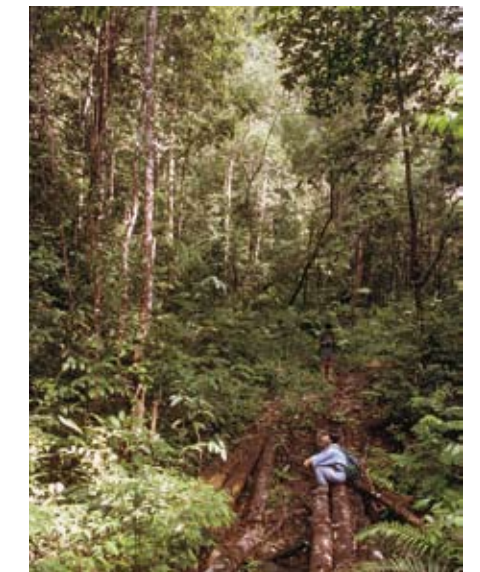
I joined the NSS in 1984—'Malayan Nature Society: Singapore Branch' it was called then. This historic shot is from the Endau Rompin Expedition, 14 March 1986. The people are (from left) Morten Strange, Lim Kim Chuah, Lim Kim Seng, R. Subaraj, See Swee Leng, and Sunny Yeo. It is historic for two reasons: The editor-in-chief still has hair, and Kim Seng and Subaraj are friends, working together on a bird checklist for the future national park.



There were hundreds of endemic birds throughout South-east Asia, especially in Indonesia, that needed to be photographed; many had never even been illustrated in drawings, so I wasn't always sure what I was looking for! I was the first photographer to visit Halmahera, Flores, Timor, and many other islands that were then considered remote and little-known. I would usually attract attention wherever I went; this photograph is from the trailhead at Arfak Mountains in West Papua province.

photography, writing, project management, publishing and marketing; it's all been about nature. When the opportunity presented itself, I took on the assignment as editor-in-chief of *Nature Watch*. This was a magazine started by my old friend, the late Clive Briffett (see Volume 18 No. 1 Jan-Mar 2010 for more details about Clive's contribution). The magazine was falling behind schedule then, costing the society money and members. I started in June 2009 and my first issue was Volume 16 No. 4. I held up the magazine and asked myself: 'Why would anyone pay five dollars for this?' and then I tried to tailor content from that. Today, two and a half years and fourteen issues later, I feel I have done what I could, and I am handing the magazine back to the society and on to another editor.

So what should I do now? There is no need for me to take any more bird photographs. There is no need for me to publish anything; today so much information is available online free of charge. Do you know what we need today? Rational, ethical and competent *financial management*! I want to re-invent myself as an honest financial advisor—yes; I know it sounds like a contradiction in terms for most people. But you have to set your goals high and believe that you can make a difference. 🌳



This is from a trip to the Jemaluang rainforest off Highway 50 in Johor in 1991. This area with the Panti forest off Highway 3 was our favorite haunt for Sunda forest birds and animals in those days, as it still is for current naturalist cohorts. The lady on the log is Ng Bee Choo. No, there was nothing between us then, but we ended up marrying much later in 2002. Maybe there is a lesson in that somewhere, NSS as SDU (Social Development Unit)?