



Introducing...

The Green Man: Matthias Gelber.

Born and raised in rural Germany, Matthias is a world-renowned green activist who wants businesses to grow and prosper by healing the planet, not destroying it. He co-founded Maleki GmbH in 2007, a company which produces low-emission construction materials and energy-saving solutions. Matthias gives talks and trainings on environmental issues, advising corporations, governments, schools and individuals on tackling climate change. Voted 'Greenest Person on the Planet' in 2008, Matthias is also PATT's all-time 'Top Individual Tree Planter' with a total of 1,888 trees. He is currently spearheading a green revolution in Malaysia, urging people to cut their energy consumption by making small lifestyle changes.

What was your first inspiration for being green?

My first inspiration was a combination of two things: I grew up in a German village surrounded by forest and we were very close to nature – gardening, potato fields, hay in the summer, doing sustainable forestry with the cooperative in the village community, playing outside all the time after coming home from school – so that was very much grounded in mother nature. And in Germany our teachers tried to educate us in light of Germany's Second World War guilt. We watched a lot of videos about the mistakes of Nazi Germany and our teachers educated us to be agents of peace in the future; both humanitarian and the planet, the animals – be an influence of positive change. I think that shaped us as well, and the environment had a key component in there. When I was a teenager we had acid rain in Germany that killed our forests, and we campaigned against it – the Green party became very strong. Those were all aspects that helped shape me.

You live in Kuala Lumpur without a car and manage to keep your energy consumption to just \$10 a month. What is the most effective lifestyle change you could advise to others who wish to minimize their negative impact on the environment?

Actually, in this part of the world the most effective thing that people can do to immediately slash their electricity bill, in my opinion, is to shift from air-con to fan. And to focus on building houses, as a long-term thing, that are so cool with their design they don't actually need any cooling at all. But even on a home-living level, especially at night, people who are using air-con – that is a substantial energy consumer. If you can shift to a fan instead that will make an immediate impact both in saving you a lot of money and reducing the need for new power plants – saving kilowatt hours. That then reduces CO₂ emissions, because we need to produce less electricity.



Matthias in his element – building environmental awareness

You've just launched your Negawatt Revolution to encourage Malaysians to cut their energy usage. What are your long-term goals and how can people get involved?

The Negawatt Revolution is an attempt to mobilize the masses. In Malaysia there is a general apathy, the belief that “What I do doesn't really make a difference” with regards to environmental issues. So I want to break through this general barrier, this perception “I don't make a difference”, by getting a substantial number of people involved initially through my talks. I want to target 10,000 students that then recruit 100,000 of their peers, at least. And ultimately I want to target a Million Malaysians to involve them in step-by-step reductions in energy consumption. We will use an online system that can track our progress against the targets that people set. We will look at the overall amount of kilowatt hours and CO₂ emissions that we are able to save and obviously we're going to help people save money. Through this mobilizing of the masses, bottom-up, I think the ultimate target is that we can substantially reduce Malaysia's CO₂ emissions, it's inefficient use of electricity and its need for additional new power plants. Certainly building new power plants will cost a lot of money and has a significant negative environmental impact during construction and even more so in operation. This is what we want to achieve. And we want to give people the real belief that they can make a difference.

We need to limit the global temperature rise to less than 2 °C to avoid dangerous and irreversible climate change. What role do you think tree planting has to play in all this?

Tree planting is very powerful as a way of setting a symbol “You are contributing, you are making a difference”. Trees, through photosynthesis, absorb the CO₂ turning it into oxygen and this is beautiful. This is mother nature's most productive way of getting rid of CO₂ out of the air. That's why we need to plant more trees, especially in the light of massive deforestation! We need to set a symbol that we as humans can make a significant contribution towards the threat of additional temperature rise. Trees have also been used as a way of providing shade for the community, for houses. I used to drive a hybrid motorbike, and when you drive along the forest you can feel immediately that the temperature is much, much lower than in open air. There are many benefits to planting trees, so definitely we need more and more trees. Recently in Malaysia we have also seen that legal and illegal logging has massively enhanced the negative impact of flooding both in terms of economic damage and loss of life.



Matthias planting trees as part of PATT's ECO-KIDS Program in 2009

What difference can the younger generations make in our fight against climate change?

The young people, especially in South East Asia where we have a very young population, that is where my hope is. I think it's very difficult to change the behavior of the older generation. Young people are hungry; they can learn things from you. If we grow up in places where we get educators and youngsters to be green, then it really makes a difference. Recently I spoke with a local professor who had his kids growing up in Japan and he said they were so disappointed when they came back to Malaysia and there were no recycling facilities around. So really kids can make the difference. I have been giving talks to kids, and later on their parents said to me: “Oh you are the guy that has influenced our kids to challenge us to save water when we do the washing up”, and all sorts of other things. That really got me inspired because it shows that kids can be the way to influencing their parents. The movements that get initiated by children are very powerful, either on a small scale or on a large scale, so I want to put a lot of focus on them.

It's easy for those with money to preach about carbon offsetting and protecting the environment, but how do you think we can encourage poorer communities and nations to get onboard with the green movement?

Now the people with little money, or the poorer nations, might think that going green is very, very expensive – that's generally the perception. But I'm telling people I'm saving a lot of money through my holistic, eco-efficient lifestyle. Using public transport and taxis saves a massive amount of money compared to what it would cost me to actually buy, maintain and run a car. So green living is actually saving people a lot of money, and this is behavioral-based. We can initially start with changing our behaviour, focusing more on efficiency, and that way we can actually, as individuals, or even as nations, reduce consumption and thereby save money. As nations, we need to focus on the low-cost or no-cost behavioral measures, initially, to get the efficiency improvements going. Particularly the poorer countries where energy, utilities, raw materials and fuel might be very, very expensive, because they don't have the money to subsidize that kind of consumption. If they go green, if they go efficient, they will save a lot of money as well.



Matthias teaching kids as they can make a difference in saving our planet

Do you think developed countries should take more of the responsibility in fighting climate change?

Yes, developed countries need to do more. We are all sitting in the same boat. Especially those countries that have extracted most of their raw materials and already depleted their forests, they need to do more. Norway is a great example; they've given Indonesia, I think, a billion US dollars to stop deforestation. Those kinds of supports are needed. What I see could make a gigantic difference is, in Indonesia and Malaysia every year we have massive haze problems due to drained peat. Natural peat land will never burn as it has a very high water table. But draining those areas to make them available for agricultural usage destroys some of the peat structure, releases huge amounts of CO₂ and causes all sorts of other problems through underground burning, which happens during the dry season. Small-scale fires spread uncontrollably under the soil and are virtually impossible to eliminate. 97 of the worst peat fires in Indonesia and Malaysia released 3 billion tons of carbon dioxide. It's ridiculous that nothing properly is done about that, and the money will not come from local countries, the international developed country donor community needs to do more. There's also technology roll-out. From personal experience, having been involved in developing technology

for radical green concrete, it's very difficult to get these radical new technologies into the market because the conservative industry controls the marketplace with unsustainable technology and products, and has no interest in giving you any space of market access. They have high-volume low-cost production and it's very difficult to compete against them. And they have contacts, they have been looking after their customers for many, many years – it's very, very difficult to change that. So countries need to intervene in those market conditions and in those blatant CO₂ sources of gigantic expense that could easily be changed. So, much, much more support is needed. Effective, maybe non-for-profit ways of rolling out technologies to developing countries need to be found. But still giving some return to the original inventors and investors into the technology in developed countries. So we really need to innovate; we need to do more, and we need to do more very fast.

Interviewed by Simon Moore, March 2015



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PATT FOUNDATION

<http://www.pattfoundation.org/>

Negawatt Revolution

<http://negawattrevolution.org>

Matthias Gelber

<http://www.greenmanspeaks.com/>