

Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots

One extraordinary woman's research on chimpanzees created a global movement for positive environmental change. There are no chimps here but the Jane Goodall Institute is firmly seeded in this urban city. MONICA GWEE checks out its roots and shoots.

Jane Goodall is world famous, yet here, hers is perhaps, a name better known to students in schools offering the "Gifted" Programme. That may be because Jane Goodall is on the curriculum in elite schools.

Globally, this extraordinary and courageous woman who compelled world attention with her research work with chimpanzees in East Africa, is a powerful influence on education and research on the environment.

The Jane Goodall Institute Singapore (JGIS) office is the first and only one in South-east Asia and is the 25th office globally. The 26th opened after Singapore – in Africa. The first Asia office was established in Taiwan a decade ago, followed by others in China, Japan, Hongkong and Australia.

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In March 2008, JGIS received a New Initiative Grant from the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre (NVPC), following a lengthy process in trying to set up here. Ms Goodall herself had visited Singapore at the invitation of the Ministry of Education as far back as 2004.

The Institute was registered as a society in 2007, but it wasn't until the NVPC grant that things finally took off, enabling the Singapore office to open for "advancing the power of individuals to take



Jane Goodall with volunteers from Raffles Girls School.

informed and compassionate action to improve the environment for all living things".

Dr Goodall's mission strikes a chord among many student volunteers here. Richard Hartung is President of JGIS. The Seattle native moved here in 1992, after various work stints in Asia. He runs AsiaPay Solutions, a consulting firm focusing on credit cards and payment products and his position at JGIS is a voluntary one.

"The message we give out is to constantly improve the environment for animals and people," he said. "Jane spends much of her time lecturing and encouraging young people to make a difference in their world."

There are already 16 school volunteer groups here including an Early Years Montessori pre-school group and one at the National University of Singapore. These volunteers are all proud Roots & Shoots (R&S) members. The R&S groups are a Jane Goodall "badge" in over 100 countries worldwide and they have captured the imagination and creative drive of students working on community projects.

Each R&S group creates three projects a year. Ideas vary widely from recycling awareness and lower energy use tips for HDB residents in Pippit Road, to an "animal" project at the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, and sensory nature trips to Pulau Ubin for the blind.

There are 385 active volunteers in the R&S groups here. Another 2,000 students volunteer in different capacities. The Singapore American School has the largest pool of active volunteers at over 200. The school's highly successful recycling project is now a working model taught to other schools.

In June, Dr Goodall will personally launch the Institute's first Asia-Pacific Conference in Singapore. "We hope this will become the catalyst for activities among the Asian offices," Hartung said. The three-day conference will coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. The conference will also gather R&S groups throughout Asia, and it will sponsor 16 nominated students and target 250 students in all.

"There are 38 to 39 environmental groups here, what do we want to do differently? We have global best practices, templates and work plans for green projects and local and global networks to offer. Locally, even the different groups don't talk to each other, so we hope the June conference will help start the dialogue," Hartung said.

The June event is JGIS's first major fundraiser. Hartung admits it has been easier to tap into the expatriate community for non-school volunteers.

"We struggle to get Singaporean volunteers," says Hartung. "They say they don't have the time, or they are unsure about the responsibilities of Board membership. The Westerners, they just say, 'You want help? Sign me up!'" ☆

For information on the JGI Asia-Pacific Conference and dinner in June in Singapore, email hartung@starhub.net.sg