

Moloch or Oasis?

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Kuala Lumpur, the symbol of Malaysia's rise, is devouring its last trees. But its people are fighting back — hauling construction firms into court, planting green corridors. Can they succeed where others have failed? Is their city growing into the megacity of the future: built of skyscrapers, wrapped in rainforest?

Text: Matthias Thome · Photos: Ian Teh

A map accompanying the article locates Kuala Lumpur on the Malay Peninsula, along the Strait of Malacca, between Thailand to the north and Singapore to the south.

Skyscrapers stand shoulder to shoulder in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital. By 2030, ten million people will live in the metropolitan region.

The Hut

Sivakumar Muniandy never would have dared dream it: that he, the son of a rubber tapper, would take on the powerful — dragging them before the highest courts of Kuala Lumpur, his hometown, and winning. In the process, he rose to become the protector of the trees, the last ones still standing in his neighborhood. Of all people, it is Muniandy who, since the age of eleven, has lived in a 290-square-foot wooden hut: in the heart of Malaysia's multi-million-person metropolis, surrounded by skyscrapers and shopping malls. The government had the hut built when it acquired the rubber plantation — where Muniandy's father had toiled — more than four decades ago. The 98 relocated worker families were supposed to live in the huts for a few months, a year at most. Then they would move into permanent homes, Muniandy's father was promised. But nothing happened.

In September 2015, representatives of a construction company suddenly showed up at the huts. They carried letters of intent in their briefcases for the families to sign if they wanted to accept the offer: apartments of concrete and steel, finally room for everyone. Most of the hut residents signed that very summer night, Muniandy recalls. Almost all the others signed in the days that followed.

Sivakumar Muniandy sleeps on the floor; his wife, Vimalah Parmasivam (2nd from right), sleeps in her sister's hut. That way, the beds stay free for their daughters and for Muniandy's mother.

Since the construction industry was privatized in the 1980s, buildings and roads have proliferated across Kuala Lumpur. The roads have even woven themselves around the Hindu Sri Mahamariamman Temple.

How much forest can the modern megacity tolerate? How much do its residents need?

But Muniandy didn't trust the investors. Alongside a high-rise for the mostly Indian-origin families, they wanted to build luxury apartment towers more than 50 stories tall. That would also have required demolishing Taman Rimba Kiara — the park directly south of the wooden huts, where Muniandy has always gone to escape the cramped quarters. "As a boy I used to swim in the park's pond; later I sat with my daughters in the shade of its trees," says the 55-year-old. "Where are their children supposed to play?"

Almost against his will, Sivakumar Muniandy became part of a battle raging across the entire Kuala Lumpur metropolitan region. Soon ten million people will live on this lowland plain, and because the city can barely expand outward anymore, the few green islands within it are increasingly under threat. Some are landscaped parks, like the one in Muniandy's neighborhood, where ornamental trees grow in neat rows. Others are dense rainforests that reclaimed the land once rubber plantations were abandoned as no longer profitable. White-handed gibbons swing through their canopies. Below them, blue racer snakes creep through the branches, and Malayan pangolins wander — alongside people.

The questions Muniandy and his fellow campaigners are raising therefore reach far beyond the park they are defending. How much wild nature can a city of millions tolerate? How much does it need? And might Kuala Lumpur succeed where others have failed: is a green megacity of the future growing here — skyscrapers wrapped in tropical forest?

Dzaeman Dzulkifli mounts camera traps on tree trunks. The conservationist hopes to catch poachers who hunt Malayan pangolins or rare bird species.

The Grandfather's Trees

The air smells of exhaust fumes in this city. And of rain. Sivakumar Muniandy stands in the doorway of his hut, looking up at the dark clouds above the high-rises. Outside, a neighbor's child toddles barefoot across the asphalt; inside, Muniandy's mother cooks spiced rice and fills silver jugs with cow's milk. The family will carry these to the famous limestone caves in the north of Kuala Lumpur and offer them there, symbolically, to the Hindu deity Murugan. It is Thaipusam, one of the most important festivals for the Tamil community, whose roots lie in South India.

Stern faces look down from the walls of the hut's single, elongated room. They belong to Sivakumar Muniandy's grandparents, immortalized in watercolor, hung with garlands of bright yellow flowers. Both arrived in Kuala Lumpur in the early twentieth century, when the rubber boom seized the city and rubber trees displaced the native rainforest.

Muniandy's grandfather would carve fine wounds into the bark of these trees, tapping the milky-white sap that ran from them. The world craved it: Western industries especially needed the latex for car tires and balloons, for shoe soles and hot-water bottles.

Like his father before him, Sivakumar Muniandy was born on the Bukit Kiara Rubber Estate in western Kuala Lumpur, one of roughly 2,500 plantations on the Malay Peninsula, most of them run by the British. Muniandy lived among the rubber trees for eleven years. "A stream ran through the plantation," he recalls. "I played on its banks every day, free to roam. For us kids, it was a beautiful place."

In 1974, the Malaysian government nationalized the plantation. A monument to national heroes was meant to be built here, along with government buildings and a botanical garden. When construction began eight years later, Sivakumar Muniandy slept with his three siblings in a lean-to under the corrugated-iron roof of one of the huts hastily erected nearby. To this day, he unrolls a sleeping mat every evening and lays it between the couch and the sofa. His wife, Vimalah, sleeps a few hundred yards away, in her sister's identical hut. That way, the beds stay free for Muniandy's mother and his two daughters, 22 and 25.

While the daughters grew up, one of Greater Kuala Lumpur's wealthiest neighborhoods rose up next to the huts. Bit by bit, despite every promise, parts of the old plantation land also went to private investors. Shopping malls shot into the sky, along with hotel chains and luxury apartment towers. Towers up to 41 stories tall now look down mockingly on Muniandy's hut. He never got to know most of his new neighbors. Then Taman Rimba Kiara came under threat. "We could no longer allow the government to sell off green spaces that belong to all of us," says Abdul Hafiz Bakar. He lives a few streets away and, before retiring, ran a metal company that supplied, among others, Thyssenkrupp. Bakar chairs a neighborhood initiative that organized the first protests against the new development in the park: a march through the district, a picnic. "We fell on deaf ears — the city administration didn't even respond," says Bakar. "So we had to sue."

The neighborhood initiative dug through mountains of documents, pored over old court rulings and parliamentary resolutions. They contacted Sivakumar Muniandy and asked for his support. He hesitated. Most of the hut residents supported the new development, whether or not it meant destroying the park. But the trees weren't Muniandy's only argument. "Who would have guaranteed that we'd actually be allowed to move back in after the investors tore down our huts?" he asks. "They'd already broken their word so many times before."

Muniandy joined the neighborhood initiative, along with a handful of friends. They became part of a lawsuit against their own future home.

Most of the hut residents signed that very night, Sivakumar Muniandy recalls.

At the time, Kuala Lumpur's structural plan designated Taman Rimba Kiara as green space, granting the park special protection. But the activists allege that the city council systematically eroded that protection. According to Bakar, the council — long after approving the development and without informing the public — passed changes to the zoning plan, clearing the way for private investors and their projects.

The initiative petitioned for a judicial review of the government's decisions but lost at first instance. The plaintiffs were not directly affected, the judges ruled, since the park did not belong to them and they would not be directly impacted by its demolition. It was only on appeal — made possible by donations from the neighborhood — that the tide turned: the initiative was granted standing to sue, eventually taking the case all the way to the Federal Court.

"Suddenly our case mattered for the whole country," Bakar recalls. Media nationwide reported on Taman Rimba Kiara. Bakar and his fellow campaigners gave interviews, spoke of an opportunity for the entire city. Their meetings now drew crowds packed into large halls. They rode buses to the courthouse on the other side of town. And they won.

Eight years after the construction company's representatives first showed up at Muniandy's hut and pressured him to sign, Malaysia's Federal Court handed down a final ruling. It didn't just scrap the planned development, on the grounds that it actually violated the city's structural plan. More than that: the highest court upheld the appellate ruling and declared that anyone affected by the destruction of such green space had legal standing to sue.

In the case at hand, that meant everyone who could credibly show they needed Taman Rimba Kiara — to jog or picnic, to play cricket on its lawn, or simply to breathe the cool air beneath its trees. The ruling thus reaches far beyond the park itself. It establishes a right to a green city.

The judges did more than halt development next to the old rubber plantation. They established a right to a green city.

A Short History of the Green City

For a long time, this was a privilege of the ruling classes. The few trees within early European cities, for instance, grew in the sheltered courtyards of the bourgeoisie. Monastery gardens belonged to the clergy; palace parks were reserved for the nobility. Only gradually were the latter opened to the lower classes — and often not willingly. When Elector Karl Theodor gave his subjects Munich's English Garden, it wasn't, as a public notice of the time put it, because he was "graciously inclined to no longer withhold this most beautiful work of nature from the public's hours of recreation." It was a sedative: a month earlier, revolutionaries in Paris had stormed the Bastille.

Enlightenment thinking itself also reinforced the idea of a right to green space. "A respectable city must have, somewhere within its bounds, one or more large open squares," the philosopher Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld wrote in 1785 in his *Theory of Garden Art*. There, he argued, the people could gather and roam freely: "where free and healthy air can be breathed, and the beauty of sky and landscape again opens itself to enjoyment. [...] Here, all may freely claim their right to delight in nature."

But the demand for green cities only became urgent with the advance of the Industrial Revolution, as impoverished farmworkers streamed into cities and Europe's first modern metropolises took shape. Manchester became the symbol of this world coming apart at the seams. In 1750, a mere 35,000 people lived in what was then a sleepy provincial town; less than a century later, that number had grown to 242,000. Factory chimneys rose into the sky, and railway tracks sliced through what had once been idyllic, rolling hills. In the city, soot-blackened maze-like alleys led to the dwellings of the newly formed working class.

Where earlier eras would have left a bit of open space, Friedrich Engels noted during his visit to Manchester in 1843, buildings had been rebuilt and patched together "until at last not an inch of room was left between the houses that could still be built upon." Trees and meadows had no place in this Moloch of progress; green space was pushed far outside the city, into the settlements of the wealthy, often sealed off behind high walls.

Social reformers therefore demanded not only better working conditions and higher wages. They also sketched an ideal vision of the modern city. The Briton Ebenezer Howard went so far as to formulate "principles for its growth," placing a sprawling park at the center, around which concentric rings of districts would form: first stately buildings, then residential areas and workshops, and, at the city's edge, factories. Each district was to be enclosed by an undeveloped belt of parks and small woods. Green spaces, which in Manchester had had to give way to factories and slums, were now to be deliberately laid out — not least to pacify rebellious workers.

Howard's idealized "garden city" served as a direct model for only a handful of purpose-built towns, and even those were inhabited mainly by the well-off middle class. Still, the movement he belonged to set a new standard: throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, green spaces were systematically preserved across Europe, public parks were built, and urban forests were planted. In the United States, too, initiatives like the "Park Movement" and later the "City Beautiful Movement" pushed for change. What had once been a privilege — nature-based recreation in the city — gradually became a common good.

More than 60 highways cut through the Klang Valley, clearing the way for the many cars flooding the Malaysian market since the state built up a domestic auto industry.

Malaysia has 1,134 vehicles per 1,000 residents. In Germany, it's barely half that.

When demolition work began in Manhattan in 1858 to make way for Central Park — to this day one of the most visited urban parks in the world — Kuala Lumpur was still a tiny settlement in the rainforest. It had been founded just a year earlier on the orders of the aristocratic land administrator Abdullah bin Raja Jaafar. He had sent tin prospectors upriver along the Klang to explore and exploit deposits near its confluence with the Gombak. With every boatload the prospectors ferried onward to the trading towns of the west coast, the settlement grew in importance. Workers cut swaths through the rainforest, built roads, laid railway tracks. Under British colonial rule, Kuala Lumpur grew into a city — still surrounded by dense rainforest.

That forest thinned out once the first rubber tree seeds were smuggled out of the Amazon to Europe and from there exported to the colonies of Southeast Asia. Across the lowlands around Kuala Lumpur — the Klang Valley — the native dipterocarp trees, the "skyscrapers of the rainforest," were felled wholesale. Migrant laborers, mostly from China and India, toiled in the tin mines and worked the plantations. British Malaya, as the colonial rulers named the Malay Peninsula together with the island of Singapore, became the world's largest producer of rubber.

When Malaysia won its independence in August 1957, 317,000 people lived in Greater Kuala Lumpur. The city had grown into the economic and cultural center of the young nation, which in the 1970s began exploiting its abundant oil reserves as well. Malaysia rose to become a "tiger economy" — one of those Southeast Asian nations posting tremendous growth rates.

The forests on the city's edge are more than its green lungs. Their soils store rainwater and channel it into the Klang Gates Dam, Kuala Lumpur's largest reservoir.

Building a railway line means people must make way too: Batu 12, a settlement on the city's outskirts inhabited by the indigenous Orang Asli, came under particular pressure.

In the early 1980s, Malaysia invested billions in building up its own automobile industry. The state became the majority shareholder of Proton, the country's largest domestic carmaker. In the 1990s, cheap Proton models flooded the market. Prosperity grew, and the rural population pushed into Kuala Lumpur; by the turn of the millennium, four million people lived in the Klang Valley. Kuala Lumpur was now a megacity. And it threatened to become a Moloch.

Alicia Teoh's Forest

Alicia Teoh has to shout. "Come on, go! The truck's clear now!" Over the din of the four-lane road, where she and her companions wait at the curb for a gap, there's no other way to be heard. It's mid-morning, and sweat stains are already showing through Teoh's outdoor shirt. Hot, humid tropical air hangs over the asphalt. The sun blazes overhead.

Teoh walks through the streets of Shah Alam, one of the planned cities that sprang up around Kuala Lumpur as Malaysia industrialized. Technical universities have settled here, and Proton car bodies rolled off the assembly line in its factory halls until the plant closed last autumn. Officially, Shah Alam and Kuala Lumpur are 18 kilometers apart. But the two cities have long since grown into one another, woven together by a web of roads.

As the rubber plantations stopped being profitable, the rainforest returned — creating an urban wilderness.

The decision to build a domestic car industry didn't just boost Malaysia's economy. There are 1,134 vehicles for every 1,000 residents in Malaysia — in Germany, Austria, or Switzerland, it's barely half that. The conurbations in particular had to adapt accordingly. More than 60 highways now wind through Greater Kuala Lumpur. Some are ten lanes wide, looking at night like airport runways. Others snake on concrete pillars through canyons of buildings — on a second, third, even fourth level, because there was no room left below. Driving on them, you can peer through soot-blackened windows straight into people's apartments.

Teoh hurries across the road. She walks alongside a chain-link fence, knowing exactly where it opens just wide enough for a body to slip through onto a narrow path. She plunges into the Shah Alam Community Forest.

Instantly, the city recedes into the far distance. Cicadas drown out the sputter of engines. Ferns and palm fronds block the view. Behind them, huge trees loom. Strangler figs have climbed up their trunks, bearing thumb-sized fruit. The air carries the smell of rotting earth.

"We need our forests," Teoh pants as she climbs a steep slope covered in rustling leaves. It's the terrain itself that has ensured the trees here, barely a ten-minute drive from her home, still stand close together. The Klang Valley is riddled with jagged limestone outcrops and ridges of granite and quartz. The ground beneath the Shah Alam Community Forest, too, was too hilly to be worth developing. The primary forest was cleared anyway; its trees were sawn into planks and turned into furniture. On the gentler slopes, rubber trees were planted, later oil palms. When the plantations stopped being profitable, they were abandoned, and the rainforest returned. All across the Klang Valley, trees have survived — and new ones have grown — this way. In total, these fragmented forests, cut through by roads and neighborhoods, cover 170,000 hectares: an area nearly twice the size of Berlin.

Teoh stops, digging wire and plastic tags out of her backpack. She ties trail markers to branches: three kilometers to the summit of Bukit Pasir, five and a half to Lake Mirror. "When I first came here ten years ago, I still had to hack through the thicket with a machete," she recalls. "Nobody cared about the forest then." But Teoh had grown tired of training for her long-distance runs on asphalt. She'd often run in circles around her

neighborhood so as not to leave her son alone. As he got older, she went looking for green space and found the Shah Alam Community Forest. From then on, she hiked and jogged through it several times a week — often, as today, with her son and a few friends. "Everything here is special," says Teoh. "The smell, the sounds, the air. I find peace."

A few days earlier, the 45-year-old had sat in the stuffy back room of the church whose administration employs her, surrounded by members of the "Friends of Shah Alam Community Forest." Homemade tiramisu sat on the table, next to steaming nasi lemak — rice wrapped in banana leaf, served with fiery sambal and dried anchovies. "We've come a long way, and we can be proud of that," Teoh said, looking encouragingly at the tired faces of the eight members who had shown up. Before that, they'd reported on the past year's projects: the trails they'd repaired with shovels and machetes; the many schoolchildren they'd taught to identify which leaves fall from which trees; and the mountains of paperwork they'd fought through trying to understand how they might still save their forest.

Kuala Lumpur's population, it's true, is no longer growing nearly as fast as it was in the early 1990s, when it increased by eight percent a year. But the city can barely expand anymore — it's hitting its geographic limits. To the west lies the Strait of Malacca; to the northeast begins the highlands of the Malay Peninsula, a landscape shaped by steep mountains. The once-worthless lowland forests are therefore turning into lucrative building land.

Parts of Shah Alam's urban forest, too, have been sold to investors. A road is planned to connect the districts to the west and east of the forest, and residential developments are being built — marketed as nature-close, with views of Mirror Lake. Nearly half of the originally 360-hectare forest has already been cleared. The "Friends of Shah Alam Community Forest" have therefore also gone to court. The authorities, they allege, sold off the forest land more than 20 years ago but failed to inform the public — making it impossible to object at the time. The government, they say, violated the rights of everyone who benefits from the forest, just as it did in the case of the small park in Sivakumar Muniandy's neighborhood.

For three and a half years, Alicia Teoh and her fellow campaigners tried to stop the development projects. In April 2026, a final court decision came down: the judges found no serious procedural errors and denied the request for a review of the government's decisions. It never even came to a hearing. "We're fighting an unequal battle," says Teoh. "The construction industry is like a hungry beast that has to be fed. Stop one of its projects, and the whole supply chain is affected. Politicians don't want to be held responsible for that. And you simply can't make money from a forest."

Teoh knows the back ways around the cleared patches that bulldozers have already torn into her forest. Again and again, she slows her pace, almost tiptoeing, listening. Suddenly she stops, raises a finger to her lips, and looks up into the canopy. "A white-handed gibbon," she whispers. "I've heard them many times, but I've never seen one." Teoh now stands rooted between the trees. Only her eyes move as the primate's calls draw closer.

Then chaos erupts. A troop of long-tailed macaques races, shrieking loudly, through the canopy, leaping recklessly from tree to tree. "There he is!" Teoh calls, flinging her arm upward. About 20 meters above the ground, a white face flickers through the leaves. As if its hands were hooks, the gibbon grips the branches, swinging again and again toward the macaques to chase them off. But they only duck away briefly, returning the moment the gibbon turns its back. They seem to be taunting it.

None of the animals pays any attention to the five humans staring up at them, mouths open. Then the gibbon has had enough: it swings in huge arcs through the canopy and disappears. Three macaques follow hesitantly. The rest let it go.

Botanist Dzaeman Dzulkifli's team raises seedlings from dipterocarp seeds. These "skyscrapers of the rainforest" are meant to form green corridors and connect the remaining forests.

At first, Teoh says, it was only about the forest as something that served people: a natural refrigerator in an ever-hotter city, a catch basin for the fierce monsoon rains, a place for recreation close to home. That changed once she got to know its inhabitants, one by one.

The Shah Alam Community Forest lies between two much larger forest areas and forms a green corridor. To demonstrate how important it is for wildlife, the activists teamed up with a research group. They placed nine camera traps in their urban forest and, within four months, captured not only white-handed gibbons but also Malayan porcupines, white-bellied rat snakes, a Sunda owl, and leopard cats. Even the hindquarters of a Malayan tapir showed up in the pixelated footage. "And yet we're surrounded by roads and high-rises," says Teoh, who, ever since seeing the gibbon, bounces excitedly across the forest floor. "It's just incredible!"

On the way back to the parking lot, her companion spots dozens of seeds from a dipterocarp tree. Two red strips protrude from the hazelnut-sized fruit; once it falls freely, these become rotor blades that carry it gently to the ground. Teoh cups her right hand, places one of the seeds inside, and photographs it: "I have to show this to Dzaeman."

Everything here is special, says Alicia Teoh: the smell, the sounds, the air. The 45-year-old hikes through the forest in her neighborhood several times a week.

When the sun sets, the forest glows: a larva of the genus Lamprigera crawls across the forest floor of the former Bukit Kiara rubber plantation.

Macaques dart through the canopy of the Shah Alam Community Forest, as a gibbon's calls echo around them.

Connecting the Green Islands

The best view of Kuala Lumpur is from Bukit Tabir. This narrow quartz-rock ridge lies on the city's northeastern edge and marks the boundary of what conservationists have dubbed Malaysia's "backbone": the 5.3 million hectares of rainforest stretching from here to the north of the country — the "Central Forest Spine." In some areas, the forest here is up to 130 million years old; yellow meranti trees rising 60 meters tall break through its canopy. Beneath them, dense jungle shelters sun bears and the country's last Malayan tigers. "To me, this is one of the most beautiful places in the world," says botanist Dzaeman Dzulkifli, letting his gaze wander. "It's hard to imagine that the other side once looked like this too." To the west, the quartz ridge drops hundreds of meters, opening onto a view of Kuala Lumpur's skyline shimmering in the midday heat. Merdeka 118 rises into the sky, an office and hotel complex nearly 679 meters tall. Below it, apartment blocks line the streets, forming a labyrinth of concrete and asphalt. Within it, the forests look like foreign bodies, growing in isolation on steep hills. Dzulkifli wants to connect them. That's why he's here.

He runs the Tropical Rainforest Conservation and Research Centre (TRCRC), which he founded. With a handful of staff, he operates a tree nursery in the west of the city. Hundreds of trees grow there — some magnolias among them, including a beech species native to Southeast Asia. But most of the young trees belong to the Dipterocarpaceae family, the "two-winged fruit" trees. Their trunks typically grow ramrod-straight, forming up to 80 percent of the canopy in Malaysian rainforests. Some species flower every two years, others only every five to seven. What triggers this isn't fully understood, though the trees often respond to prolonged dry spells brought to Southeast Asia by El Niño. When conditions align, the rainforest bursts into mass bloom, and a few weeks later, countless seeds sail down to earth, carried on their wings. "Most of these seeds can't be stored," says Dzulkifli. "So we have only a narrow window to collect them and get them to germinate."

The TRCRC also runs a nursery in Malaysia's north, near the border with Thailand, as well as on the island of Borneo. There, teams collect seeds in the rainforest and plant green corridors from the trees that grow from them, closing the gaps that plantations and settlements have torn into the rainforest here too. It's crucial, Dzulkifli says, that the seeds come from the region — only then can one be sure they're variants adapted to the local microclimate. The same holds for the forests around Kuala Lumpur: Dzulkifli gets his seeds from the people who move through them.

Once the trees grown from these seeds are big enough, Dzulkifli and his team plant them on vacant land near the nursery. That land belongs to Sime Darby, a Malaysian palm-oil producer, and is meant to become part of a trendy, green new city district. The project is not without controversy among Kuala Lumpur's conservationists. To many, Sime Darby is an enemy — the company, after all, bears some responsibility for the fragmentation of their forests.

Dzulkifli sees it differently. It isn't enough, he counters, to simply keep stopping the newest development project. Instead, companies need to be convinced that they, too, benefit from a green city. "Time is running out on us," he warns. "Kuala Lumpur stands at a crossroads: either we remain the city in the rainforest, or we become a concrete wasteland."

The numbers seem to back him up. The metropolitan region's breakneck growth has, admittedly, slowed considerably since the Asian financial crisis of 1997. Even so, the Klang Valley lost another 87,400 hectares of forested land between 2001 and 2023 — more than half of what remains today. The consequences are plainly felt, especially under the added pressure of climate change. The area covered by particularly hot zones in Greater Kuala Lumpur has grown by almost 13 percent over the past three decades. In these zones, temperatures remain permanently above 30 degrees Celsius. At the same time, as green spaces have shrunk, the city's natural "refrigerators" — areas that stay cooler than 25 degrees Celsius — have shrunk by eight percent.

Many activists look almost enviously at neighboring Singapore. Since 1967, the island state has pursued a nationwide strategy to expand its green spaces, creating more than 400 new parks since then. Together they form a 12,000-hectare network, linked by greened riverbanks and corridors.

Karst hills rise into the sky across the Klang Valley. For a long time they weren't profitable enough as building land and were spared from roads and houses. Can these green islands be reconnected?

Dzulkifli's nursery is part of a network modeling itself on Singapore. More than a dozen initiatives across the Klang Valley are searching for ways to connect green spaces with one another. They plant the barren strips beneath power lines and highways, and green the concrete-choked banks of the Klang and Gombak rivers. The goal is to create new pathways — not just for animals, but for people too.

"In a densely populated city like Kuala Lumpur, every square meter is fiercely contested. And where trees stand, cars can't drive," says Vivian Soon, a researcher at the Malaysian Nature Society. The NGO coordinates the project, drawing funding from United Nations development programs and distributing it to local initiatives. "We're still right at the

beginning," Soon admits. For the city's north and west, an expert team has already identified a possible green corridor that could link a total of 16 forests and parks — Taman Rimba Kiara, the park directly south of Sivakumar Muniandy's hut, among them.

Implementation, however, has proven difficult. Sometimes resistance comes from construction companies or the public; other times, the political will is simply lacking. Malaysia, Soon says, is simply not Singapore. Government action here is far more federalist in character: the Klang Valley alone spans two states, within which half a dozen regional governments administer their own districts and have a say in how land is used. Nature conservation, by contrast, remains largely the responsibility of the federal government. "That's why there won't be a single, top-down government program capable of saving our forests on its own," says Soon. A green Kuala Lumpur has a future only if enough people commit to it: "Our pressure is working. The only question is whether it's strong enough — whether our movement is growing fast enough."

Home, For Now

Even three years after the court ruling that saved Taman Rimba Kiara, Sivakumar Muniandy is still waiting for a new home. As one of the few in his area who could actually afford to rent one with his family, he's in a better position than most — Muniandy is employed at a major bank, and his daughters work in human resources. But an affordable home would lie far outside the city center, in Kuala Lumpur's densely built suburbs. "I don't want to leave here," says Muniandy. "We know all our neighbors here. This is home."

Especially since new building plans are finally on the table. Instead of eight luxury apartment towers, smaller high-rises are now planned, with room for all 98 families of the former plantation workers plus several hundred additional units. Taman Rimba Kiara would thus be preserved in full. Muniandy hopes to sign the contracts before the hut residents are once again forgotten.

Because the fight for the green megacity of the future has long since shifted elsewhere. It now rages just a five-minute walk from Muniandy's hut: at the edges of the old plantation, where his grandfather once tapped sap from the rubber trees. High-rises are planned there too — ones that would tower several stories above the dipterocarp trees now growing back on the site.

Although the first trees have already been felled, the "Friends of Bukit Kiara" are still trying to stop the project. They too have gone to court, written letters to local politicians, held demonstrations. When they organized a night hike to show what impact the new buildings might have on the rare fireflies in their beloved forest, they expected a handful of interested people — a dozen, maybe.

Four hundred showed up. 

Photographer Ian Teh (right) has been documenting the transformation of his hometown for years. GEO reporter Matthias Thome found his way around the forest more easily than the city: multi-lane highways there often blocked his path.