

ENVIRONMENT

Nurturing a living classroom



Stamford American International School started a Rare Tree Initiative to bring learning to life outside of the classroom. Students from various levels are involved in maintaining the area where 21 of the trees are planted as well as a separate plant nursery. ST PHOTOS LIM YAOHUI

BY ATHENA TAN

Stamford American International School Singapore (SAIS) has many thumbs – green thumbs.

The school has planted 21 rare tree saplings next to its school field. These include the hopea helferi and shorea sumatrana, which are endangered species of trees.

This is not a teacher's pet-project. The saplings were planted by students, who regularly tend to the "Rare Tree Forest" and a separate plant nursery also located on school grounds.

Mrs Rhonda Wiens, the Middle-Year programme coordinator, said the teachers had started to hand over the project to the students in January.

Multiple student groups, with 285 Stamford American students in total, have been actively volunteering to maintain the Rare Tree Forest since the saplings were planted on Jan 31.

Among these students were Divya Ghosh, 15, who became involved in environmental action after Hurricane Katrina flooded a section of her Texas home; Kaira Steeman, 16, whose passion is green architecture; and Saakshi Muly, 12, one of the student leaders who attended a workshop on caring for the rare trees at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Said Saakshi, who waters the rare tree saplings regularly: "We want the environment to grow forwards! Not go backwards. That's what our inspirations said."

Their inspirations include Dr. Jane Goodall,



Kaira Steeman designed a food composting system in class that could be implemented in the school's plant nursery.

a famous primatologist and conservationist who believes in preserving the natural world and communities, and Mr Elango Velautham, a deputy director of arboriculture and the Plant Resource Centre and Curator of Trees at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Meeting their inspirations spurred the students to bring their own tree forest to life. In November last year, 14 students from Grades 5 to 10, accompanied by five teachers, made their way to Thompson Park to plant trees with Dr Goodall, who is also the founder of the Jane Goodall Institute.

And on Jan 23, students from Grades 5 to 11 met Mr Velautham, who provided guidance on the growing and maintaining of a nursery in his personal capacity. Said Tristan Joo, 15: "He had us all stand out in the sun on the concrete, saying, 'If there were trees planted here, this wouldn't be an issue – there would be shade!', as a way of explaining the importance of planting trees."

Working with both of them had seeded the idea of starting their own tree forest. Said Tristan: "In International Baccalaureate (the academic programme the students are in), we're taught things in a global context, and that experience in the Singapore Botanic Gardens showed me that the planet is really what we have, that we can work to preserve trees here and do our part for the Earth."

Setting up the Rare Tree Forest had its challenges. Divya recounted: "When we were carrying the saplings down (to plant), my (sapling's) branch hit the wall.

"It was so heavy, and it broke."

She was dismayed, but it taught her to treat the saplings with more caution.

On what they hope other students can take away from the experience, Max Hilton, 14, a member of the Grade 9 science cohort which conducts out-of-classroom learning by collecting data on the trees, said: "I initially didn't understand issues related to trees – it is scary to think that we could potentially damage a tree.

"So what drives me is the knowledge that if these die, we are losing an actual portion of what's left of the world."