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UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS AND BENEFITS OF TREE-PLANTING CAMPAIGN FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract: Environmental sustainability is a pressing global concern due to the effects of climate change on health, ecosystems, and economies. In response, Malaysian government agencies and private companies have engaged in tree-planting initiatives as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts. In 2022, HelloWeb (HW), a telecommunication company, launched a tree-planting campaign through its foundation, HelloWeb Foundation (HWF), involving multiple stakeholders across various locations. This study explores the process and benefits of HWF's tree-planting campaign, addressing a critical gap in research on practical environmental sustainability initiatives. Prior studies have primarily focused on reporting environmental elements in sustainability reports required by Bursa Malaysia, often using quantitative approaches. In filling the research gap, this study employed a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews as the main instrument to examine environmental sustainability practices through a tree-planting campaign. The findings outline the planning and execution process for tree planting and enumerate the campaign's benefits, such as its contributions to environmental sustainability and raising awareness of Malaysia's tree heritage. The results demonstrate that the telecommunications company successfully executed the campaign and achieved its objectives.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Environmental, Sustainability practice, Telecommunication company.

1.0 Introduction

Climate change is a persistent global issue manifesting in various damaging ways across the planet. The impacts are widespread, affecting health, ecosystems, and economies. One of the initiatives to respond to climate change is tree planting (Turner-Skoff & Cavender, 2019). Trees are the unsung heroes in the fight against climate change. Not only do they pull carbon out of the atmosphere, but they also help communities and ecosystems adapt to extreme weather events and a hotter planet. They slow flood waters, reduce temperatures in urban areas, and make people healthier and happier. Indigenous trees and forests play an important role in mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change. As carbon sinks, trees and forests help cool the earth by removing carbon

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dioxide from the air and storing it within their roots, stems, and leaves. Trees also build long-term climate resilience by helping regulate the water cycle, reducing soil erosion and the risk of landslides, floods, and drought while purifying the air and providing habitats that house biodiversity and maintain the genetic diversity of species (Turner-Skoff & Cavender, 2019).

HelloWeb (HW), one of the largest telecommunication companies in Malaysia, has a longstanding commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The company creates opportunities and aims for greater impacts through various programmes and initiatives for its diverse stakeholder groups, including communities. In 2022, for example, HelloWeb Foundation (HWF), HW's foundation arm, launched a tree-planting campaign as one of the initiatives. It was the most extensive Gutta-Percha Tree-Planting Campaign in 24 hours and a Malaysia Book of Records-certified campaign in conjunction with World Telecommunication and Information Society Day 2022. The event was inspired by the "Greening Malaysia: Our Trees, Our Life" campaign under the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, which aims to preserve the country's biological diversity. This campaign was a significant effort in HW's commitment to plant 12,000 trees nationwide by the end of 2022, aiming to offset greenhouse gas emissions and delay the effects of climate change.

The tree-planting campaign was one of HW's significant CSR environmental sustainability initiatives. As such, it attracted researchers who sought to further understand the implementation of environmental sustainability practices. One of the reasons for conducting this study was that research on environmental sustainability practices was still lacking. Most previous studies focused on reporting the environmental element in a company's Sustainability Report and used quantitative methods. However, very little attention has been given to the implementation of the CSR efforts themselves, especially those related to environmental sustainability initiatives. Furthermore, this study intended to utilise the qualitative method to investigate this issue.

Thus, it was timely for the researchers to undertake this study. Guided by HWF's anticipated outcomes, this study aims to understand HW's approach to environmental sustainability through its tree-planting campaign. The research began with an in-depth campaign analysis and then examined the benefits of HWF's implementation of this initiative.

2.0 Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic yet flexible approach, using a qualitative methodology to examine the issue through a qualitative paradigm. Given the subjective nature of the study, where subjectivity is integral to exploring the 'how' questions, a qualitative methodology was deemed suitable. This methodology is appropriate for research questions that require in-depth exploration and investigation. Like any other qualitative research question, this study depended on a well-specified research question with inquiry-based understanding. This study employed a generic inquiry method to maintain the quality of the research, as this method serves as a foundation for understanding issues or phenomena that demand a descriptive qualitative approach and interpretive description subcategories. Since this study aims to describe the environmental sustainability practices through HW's tree-planting campaign, the generic inquiry was particularly appropriate.

This research employed various data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and field observations. Participants for the semi-structured interviews were chosen using a purposeful sampling technique (also known as selective or criterion sampling), in which the sampling decisions were made by going into a study on "reasonable" grounds (Lucas, 2014; Sandelowski, 1995). Participants were selected based on their backgrounds, and all were representatives from the campaign's partner institutions. The list of names was gathered from HWF during the first meeting. Each participant was given a pseudonym to maintain their confidentiality. Transcriptions of semi-structured interviews were analysed using "thematic analysis" by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Upon completing the online interview, the researchers arranged visits to the planting sites where gutta-percha trees were planted at the participating institutions. During the visits, the researchers observed the survival rates of the gutta-percha trees and recorded the findings. The observational data gathered in the field was then analysed to assess the survival and growth conditions of the gutta-percha trees in the research setting.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

3.1 The process of implementing the Tree-Planting Campaign by HWF

At the initial stage, HWF discussed the implementation of gutta-percha tree planting with the Student Volunteer Foundation (SVF). Both parties agreed on their roles: HWF would coordinate with local governments for location approvals. SVF would liaise with the universities and assign volunteers for each planting site. Both parties agreed that, concerning the location determination, HWF would deal with local governments, and SVF would deal with related universities and arrange volunteers for all planting locations. HWF also made arrangements with a sapling supplier to provide 5,017 gutta-percha saplings. SVF and site hosts coordinated the logistical aspects of transporting and mobilising the saplings. Hosts at each planting location prepared the designated areas and created planting holes. On planting day, all parties worked together to complete the planting of the saplings within 24 hours. Participants were briefed on the fundamentals of gutta-percha cultivation, including key characteristics and monitoring practices. This collaborative effort involved institutional management, staff, and nearly 1,000 volunteers from SVF and HW's Reaching Out Volunteers (HWROV). According to GP001:

"All partners who provided the planting locations were aware that these gutta-percha trees were slow-growing trees that originated from the forest and lived in shading areas. Some of the planting location partners planted gutta-percha trees in the open space, which was unsuitable for the trees. We had tried to give a solution such as putting planting gel in the hole based. We have spent almost RM270k to fund the execution of this project. This budget included the gutta-percha saplings, launching ceremony, transportation, volunteers' merchandise and planting instruments" – GP001.

In addition to the funding from HWF and SVF, all of the partners supported the programme with direct or indirect contributions. For example, a sapling supplier offered discounts for the gutta-percha saplings and sponsored plant locations. In addition, Mr DIY provided free planting instruments such as gloves and shovels.

"We also received contributions through engagements with our partners. For example, saplings supplier sponsored 500 gutta-percha saplings planted in their area. They also sold gutta-percha saplings at a minimum price because this project also contributed to the Greening Malaysia project. Mr DIY provided free planting instruments such as gloves and planting shovels" – GP001.

Location hosts for this project also contributed to cleaning the area and digging planting holes using their budget.

"Some local councils spent almost RM40k to RM50k to clear the location and made the planting hole" – GP001.

"We contributed almost RM30k to clean the area and made the planting hole in our institution" – GP002.

"It was quite costly to clean the planting area. We have invested almost RM15k to clean the area" – GP007.

3.2 Benefits of the implementation of the Tree-Planting Campaign by HWF

3.2.1 Secure Malaysia's tree heritage

According to a HWF representative, gutta-percha has a sentimental value to HW since its rubber was previously used mainly for submarine cables, communication, and telegraphs. HWF has

developed basic gutta-percha research since 2018, and all the documents are located at the Telegraph Museum in Taiping Perak. Besides the vast history of gutta-percha in the telecommuting industry, it was included in the red list of threatened species under the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The extinction of gutta-percha is perhaps due to its slow growth, as mentioned by participants GP001, GP004, and GP007:

“We are all aware that gutta-percha is a slow-growth forest tree, but it does not require high maintenance.”

Additionally, GP001 indicated that neighbouring countries, such as Singapore and Indonesia, have already gazetted gutta-percha trees as a national heritage and have developed a national plan to protect them from extinction.

"Many sources have confirmed that gutta-percha was originally from Malaysia, but we have not planned any protection programme."

Thus, as gutta-percha was originally from Malaysia's forest and essential in the telecommunication industry, HWF took the initial step to protect this national heritage tree from extinction.

3.2.2 Environmental Sustainability

This gutta-percha tree-planting programme was to support Greening Malaysia's agenda by planting 100 million trees across the country by 2025. GP001 indicated:

"This tree-planting campaign supported the Greening Malaysia agenda launched by the 8th Prime Minister in 2021. Thus, most of the city councils we had approached agreed to join due to this Greening Malaysia Agenda."

She added:
"As a company, we are responsible for sustainability, especially in environmental, social, and governance (ESG), to save the planet. This is part of our employees' contribution towards environmental sustainability. This campaign could reduce the carbon footprint."

One of the local councils also supported this Greening Malaysia agenda through a tree-planting campaign:

"As a local authority, we are responsible for realising the Greening Malaysia agenda by planting 100 million trees. The tree-planting campaign is one of the initiatives that will help us realise this Greening Malaysia agenda."

GP007 also indicated that his university was involved in this campaign due to its contribution towards environmental sustainability.

"In our university, we concentrated on three (3) pillars: environment, socioeconomics, and education. When we conduct community outreach, we always classify it into these three (3) pillars. Thus, this tree-planting campaign is in line with our environmental pillar."

3.2.3 Future research

Rubber produced by the gutta-percha tree has well-known contributions to the telecommunication and medical industries. However, its contribution was slowly forgotten due to advanced manufacturing materials. Additionally, the number of gutta-percha trees in Malaysia has reduced drastically. The tree-planting campaign would allow researchers to explore the potential applications of gutta-percha rubber in various industries.

"We have collaborated with various universities in tree-planting campaigns because there would have

been high potential for future research using the gutta-percha tree's rubber. Besides using gutta-percha in the telecommunication and medical industry, university researchers could find other uses of the tree's rubber in other industries" – GP001.

"Our university has various experts in tree-based product research. Perhaps, one day, when this gutta-percha tree is matured, we can proceed with the research on it" – GP008.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, HWF and its 18 partners successfully hosted a tree-planting campaign, focusing on gutta-percha trees, a highly appropriate choice due to its historical significance in the telecommunication industry. In addition to being recorded in the Malaysia Book of Records, the campaign has achieved several objectives, such as raising public awareness of the gutta-percha tree. Most importantly, this campaign significantly contributed to environmental sustainability for future generations.

Participants joined the campaign with various motivations. Public and private universities viewed it as an opportunity to undertake research related to gutta-percha rubber while fostering a spirit of volunteerism among staff and students. Local councils were motivated by the chance to achieve their KPIs through tree planting in public parks. Furthermore, this campaign has enhanced the attractiveness of the public parks and encouraged public recreational activities. Generally, both universities and local councils agreed that their involvement in the campaign was due to their commitment to environmental sustainability and biodiversity protection.

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