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Personality

Dr Vellayan and his animal kingdom

HIS gruff demeanour belies a soft heart, perhaps a softness reserved only for animals.

He is known for his directness of speech, no beating around the bush when he has something to say. He is also infamous for his long, drawn out tales, which often involve a tale within a tale.

And his flair for drama is legendary. Sudden outbursts coupled with the thumping of the table stressing a point are not unusual.

Decorum and pleasantries are often ignored, for at the end of the day, for Dr S. Vellayan — just Dr V. to the folks in his circle — it is always about the animals.

Having dedicated the last 27 years of his life to the animals of Zoo Negara, Malaysia's national zoo, veterinarian Dr Vellayan retired in April this year.

Three decades of serving as the country's first wildlife veterinarian, he spent his last few weeks packing his books, files, personal collectibles and memories.

"This is where I have spent my entire working life. I started here, and I ended here," he says, reminiscing as he sorts laminated news articles dating back to the 1970s, dusting books before popping them into labelled boxes.

"So much time, all reduced into a few boxes."

There is something to be said about a man whose resume is 27 pages long, detailing publications and professional qualifications, conferences attended and papers presented, lectures and interviews given, of winning Fulbright scholarships not once but twice.

And even newspaper articles about himself, of which there are numerous pieces in various languages.

Essentially, his resume tells of his life experiences. Reading between the (many) lines of his resume, one can't help but notice the recurring theme — his love for wildlife.

It is obvious that accolades speak far more than just professional achievements, but rather recognition of a man's lifelong passion, an interest which became a vocation to help wild animals in captivity.

Dr Vellayan was born in 1952 to a couple living on Carey Island, Port Klang. The family was not well off, which is why education was of utmost importance.

"My mother especially pushed me to study hard and make something of myself so I would have a good life," he shares. "She even pawned her jewels for my studies."

When he was young, he figured he would become a teacher but that dream was shelved when he was diagnosed an asthmatic. The blackboard and dusty chalk scenario wouldn't have been the best thing for him.

So he looked for other options, and considered medicine, dentistry and veterinary

medicine. Accepted by a university in India into its veterinary medicine course, he was excited yet apprehensive.

He had little idea where his life's journey would take him. It was a tough time there, but he made it and returned proudly armed with his degree.

He was, however, in for a rude shock — the existing wildlife institutions did not have a position for a veterinarian!

"It wasn't easy in the days when 'honourable' professions were few... and animal-related work was hardly considered a career."

He read an article that said that the zoo should have its own veterinarian. So he took a chance and wrote in, but was politely declined. But he persisted, applying and re-applying, until Zoo Negara took him onboard in 1981.

"Finally, it really was like a dream had come true; to work with animals. My mother was worried because instead of working with domestic animals, I was going to work with tigers and elephants!" he remembers.

"Yet I felt no fear. I was already exposed to working with wild primates during the course of my studies and I knew what to expect."

He does carry some battle wounds, though. Over the years, Dr Vellayan has been gored by a rhinoceros and bitten by a tapir, but none so serious that it made him rethink his choice of career.

"It's just part of the job," he says nonchalantly.

Working with the zoo's orang utans made him particularly happy. He enjoyed a special relationship with the red-haired apes, although he insists he does not have a favourite animal or species.

"A vet shouldn't have favourites; all must be treated equally," he says. But flicking through his personal collection of photographs reveals numerous shots with Punky, Manja, Wira — all orang utans.

He remembers Wira fondly, the orang utan which he hand-raised because its mother Jane had the habit of killing her offsprings.

"Me, a bachelor dad, with a nappy-wearing orang utan sleeping on my chest!"

Wira was the zoo's poster child, and was the national mascot for Visit Malaysia Year.

He was the darling of the zoo and of the public. His sudden death in a freak accident left many reeling, especially the vet who had him.

"It was terrible. I had to conduct a post-mortem on him... it was one of the most difficult things I had to do," he remembers.

Dealing with young animals, however, probably gave him the hands-on experience needed to eventually nurture his own two children, a daughter who is pursuing a career in education like her mother, and his 14-year-old son.



Dr S. Vellayan, who claims he has no favourite animal, enjoys the company of an albino snake and a turtle.

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With a dad like Dr Vellayan, life at home was far from ordinary, and the kids would never know if the box under his arm held a toy, or an orphaned animal in need of care.

"When his pet hamster died, my son asked me to conduct a post-mortem on him!" laughs Dr Vellayan.

While the well-being of the zoo animals was his primary responsibility, much of his spare time was spent on research in the hope that studies on captive specimens would benefit the conservation of wild populations. He cited his work on diseases in leaf monkeys as an example.

Among his notable contributions over the years are the establishment of the zoo's Animal Hospital in 1990, the establishment of husbandry protocols with the assis-

tance of colleagues, students and volunteers, especially with regard to preventive medicine, and mentorship to students who have had the zoo as their training ground.

Over the years, he notes that there seems to be an increased interest in the veterinary profession, in particular wildlife medicine and conservation.

This he finds extremely exciting and a far cry from the way things were 30 years ago.

"This is probably a result of greater awareness about wildlife-related work. Today, finally, it is considered a well-respected career choice."

Dr Vellayan has himself given many career guidance talks in local universities in the hope of inspiring young Malaysians to work for animals.

Although he is retiring from the zoo, he has no plans to retire from

the field. In the pipeline are a private exotic animal practice, consultancy work with zoos, teaching and training.

Malaysia is a country where wildlife experts are few, despite the fact that the country has almost 50 zoos and is one of the 12 mega-diversity nations of the world.

In the course of his time working with wildlife, Dr Vellayan has touched and inspired many. He can be credited in part for an increasing number of students keen to work with and for wildlife.

His one regret is perhaps not spending enough time with his loved ones.

"But I will make it up to them," he says, "now that I will have more time on my hands."

Knowing him though, there won't be much time wasted before those hands are working with wildlife — what he loves and knows best.

WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT DR VELLAYAN

Dr Sandie Choong, Zoo Melaka veterinarian:

My most memorable experience with him was when we had tranquillised a tiger at the zoo to treat a wound. The *New Straits Times* was covering the procedure and, suddenly, the tiger woke up in the middle of the treatment. Everything went flying, including the photographer and reporter! Dr Vellayan, however, was so calm and injected the tiger to knock it out again. The story made NST's front page.

Dr Reza Singam, former Zoo Negara veterinarian, also the zoo's longest serving volunteer (from age 12 to 23), now Perak Turf Club's veterinary surgeon:

He was always extremely enthusiastic about wildlife. In 2004, just three months after his heart bypass operation, while others would have stayed at home resting, he insisted on joining me and another colleague to track tapirs in the forest. He thoroughly enjoyed the forest experience, looking for wild animals in the wild.

Sarah Chong, University Putra Malaysia veterinary student:

The first time I met Dr Vellayan, it was in the zoo's post-mortem room and there was a huge crocodile on the floor. Because of his accent, I thought he said "Sit on it". But he was actually telling me to "Reverse it!" as in turn it over!

Dr Vijaya Jayam, ex-Zoo Negara veterinarian, now farm manager with Zalwadi Farms Sdn Bhd

I am a product of Dr Vellayan. If it wasn't for his insightful guidance which led me to pursue veterinary medicine and mentorship while working with him at Zoo Negara's Animal Hospital, I wouldn't be where I am today. The discipline instilled then, I continue to apply in my work today.

Dr Reza Tarmizi, veterinarian, Singapore Zoological Gardens:

I worked with him at Zoo Negara right after graduating from university. It was a real learning experience. He was the one who opened up my mind to zoological science.