

Eco-Absolution

ENVIRONMENTALIST, ENTREPRENEUR, AND THE GREENEST PERSON ON THE PLANET, MATTHIAS GELBER IS ON A MISSION, AND HE'S NOT AFRAID TO WEAR HIS HEART ON HIS SLEEVE (OR T-SHIRT). *EARTH DAY* HAS COME AND GONE, BUT MATTHIAS CONTINUES TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT HIS GREEN PROJECTS AND WHY EVERY DAY NEEDS TO BE *EARTH DAY*.

TEXT MAYBRITT RASMUSSEN PHOTO SHERMEN MUKHTAR

He's the German guy in the T-shirt that says, "TREEHUGGER." His name is right below, in case you forgot, along with the proud statement: "The greenest person on the planet, www.3rdwhale.com. Plant more trees today."

You can forgive Matthias (pronounced Mat-ee-as) Gelber for being his own walking signboard. He's trying to make a difference for the environment in every way he can. "I just washed five Treehugger T-shirts in one go," Matthias confesses on his Facebook page. "Am I wearing them too often?" he asks. We think not.

Like a real-life Captain Planet, Matthias spreads eco-awareness with his signature green uniform, his frankness and his great attitude. After winning the title of *The Greenest Person on the Planet* with 51% of the vote from a pool of 600 applicants from over 40 countries, Matthias remains modest, an indicator of what he really thinks is important.

"I'm just a *kampung* boy from a little village of 500 people. I try to keep my two feet on the ground, but I do try to make myself more visible through conferences and so on to help bring about change."

He was asked to submit a video to an annual competition started by Canadian organisation, 3rdwhale. "I was one of the last to submit a video and I just thought why not?" he admits. "Now I've got a pod of beluga whales somewhere in the waters of Canada named after me and I donated the 5% of 3rdwhale's 2008 profits that I won to the Plant-A-Tree-Today (PATT) foundation, which is a reforestation project in Thailand," he says with a smile before adding, "winning the award is an honour, and it's made me more committed to the future of our planet."

Matthias mentions that Gurmit Singh K.S., the Malaysian environmental activist and Chairman of the Centre for Environment, Technology and

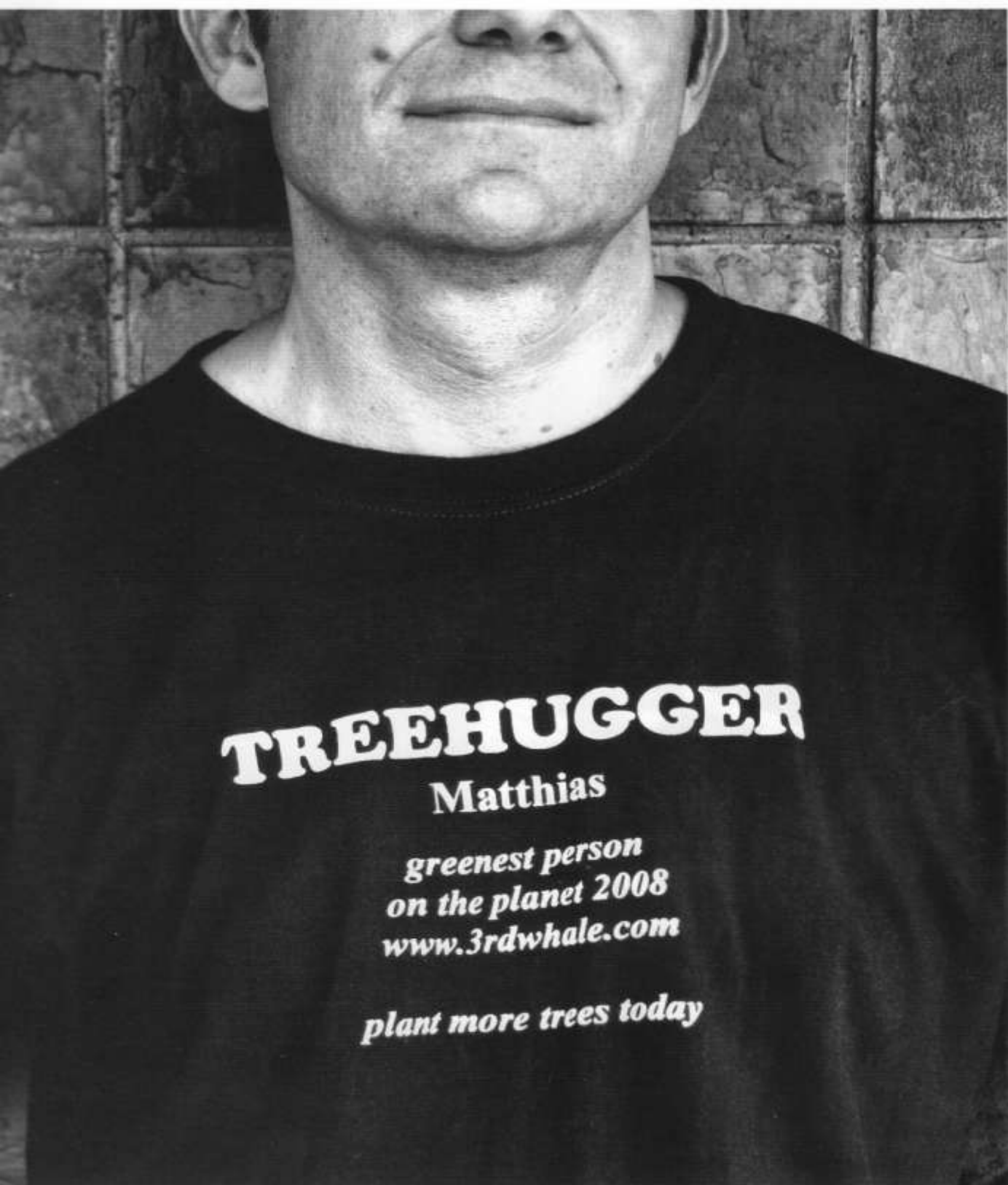
Development Malaysia, deserved the award for the *Greenest Person on the Planet*. "If I said the kinds of things he's said, I'd be in trouble as a foreigner in this country. He's so blunt and he's always been very upfront. That's why some corporations might stay away from him. He doesn't mince his words."

His passion for the planet's flora started from a young age in Germany. "When I was a kid in my village of Lippe, I even pulled up a tree and replanted it in my backyard," says Matthias with a thoughtful sip of his lime juice in bar twenty.one on bustling Changkat Bukit Bintang. He is now 41 and still planting trees.

Now Matthias aims to plant one million of those Co₂ suckers. That's no mean feat, but with the help of various organisations and volunteers, including Eco Warriors in Malaysia, which he started in November last year after winning the 3rdwhale competition, Matthias is on his way to fulfilling one of his many environmental goals.

Currently living in Kuala Lumpur under the *Malaysia My Second Home Programme*, he's starting with the North Selangor Raja Musa Peat Swamp Forest Reserve, a significant carbon sink. Amazingly, tropical peat swamps have 10 - 15 times more carbon stored in them than above ground forests due to the organic matter that has been accumulating. Malaysia has the second largest area of peat forest in the world after Indonesia.

"The peat forest reserve in North Selangor was partially destroyed by illegal settlers, who had drained and burnt the peatland forest for agriculture and livestock, releasing a major source of carbon back into the atmosphere," Matthias explains. "Together with the Global Environment Centre, the North Selangor State Forestry Department, and PATT, we hope to bring biodiversity back into the area and rehabilitate this gazetted forest that should never have been touched in the first place."



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Matthias is brimming with idealism, as environmentalists go. But he is not one of your unrealistic, dewy-eyed hippy clichés. He’s wholeheartedly committed to a green lifestyle, yes. But not at the complete expense of modern conveniences.

“We live in a modern world, so I don’t expect people to do without air-conditioning and cars completely. What people need to do is to try and find ways to reduce their consumption, to be more eco-efficient. It’s not about having a bigger car or a bigger condo. We don’t need so many things,” Matthias urges.

The burning of coal, petroleum and natural gas (also known as fossil fuels) for energy touches every aspect of modern life though it’s the main contributor to climate change. Individuals must live frugally to reduce their carbon footprint, but the support of businesses and industries is needed in equal measure. This is where Matthias’ brand of eco-activism comes in. His plan doesn’t involve latching himself to a tree. He’s putting his faith in technology, which, as any modern environmentalist will tell you, is one of the key steps to solving the global climate change crisis. “The cement industry is responsible for about 5 – 7% of global CO₂ emissions. That’s more than the entire aviation industry put together,” he says.

Matthias is a board member, shareholder and director of Maleki GmbH, a German-based startup company formed in 2007 that develops high-performance, sustainable building materials with the aim to reduce CO₂ emissions in the millions of tonnes. “There’s no reason why businesses cannot be green and cost-effective at the same time. I am convinced that we will make very good profits from our green building materials,” he explains. With a practical solution to saving the planet in hand, it’s clear that Maleki GmbH is among Matthias’ proudest achievements.

He is also acutely aware of the considerable carbon footprint that he chalks up from flying to conferences worldwide. “I try to organise my talks and conferences to be in the same area. Planting trees, sleeping with the more energy-efficient fan rather than air-con, recycling, and taking public transport are all the things I do to reduce my carbon footprint.”

“People should watch Al Gore’s movie *An Inconvenient Truth* and Leonardo DiCaprio’s *The 11th Hour* for eco-inspiration,” suggests Matthias. “I’m also reading a very interesting book now called *Hot, Flat and Crowded* by Thomas L. Friedman. It discusses climate change and the importance of acting now to save our Mother Earth.”

Watching an eco-film is easy, but this is something that some of you might balk at—Matthias doesn’t own a car. He never drives in Malaysia. “Many Malaysians will probably say, ‘Public transportation? So difficult, lah!’

Infrastructure in Malaysia seems to be inefficient, but it really depends on where you’re located. I live in the center of town so I never have problems getting one of the eco-efficient local taxis, and the Bukit Bintang monorail is near where I live.” Basically, car-dependent Malaysians could do with a spot of walking.

Thanks to Matthias, Malaysia is a greener place and he’s continually working to extend his eco-friendly influence around the world. “I have a green pension system, which is 16 hectares of biodiverse forest plantations in Panama that plant and harvest trees sustainably,” he reveals. He’s also spoken on green topics at conferences in over 38 countries; this green machine shows no sign of stopping.

“I have a good relationship with Indonesia and the Philippines. These are countries with considerable forest areas that need to be protected. I would like to help initiate projects there like the peat forest rehabilitation programme in North Selangor.”

“On an individual level, we have to look at what we can do at home and how we can green our lives,” Matthias exclaims, as he launches into his practical list of eco-friendly household solutions with refreshing German efficiency.

“First, look at your electricity bill and try to reduce it by 50%. One girl from Eco Warriors did this by trying to sleep without air-conditioning. She’d have it on for two hours to cool down the room; then she’d try to sleep with it switched off for the rest of the night. She actually posted up a picture of the bill on Facebook for everyone to see. Her monthly electricity bill has been reduced from more than RM200 to less than RM50.”

“Use less paper.”

“Use fewer plastic bottles. Try and use refillable bottles for water, but make sure these are safe plastic (non-carcinogenic). Glass is best, but there are other more practical materials.”

“Ask yourself, ‘do I need this?’ Remember, less is more.”

“Find out how you can spread the green lifestyle to other people. We need a revolution. Everybody needs to get involved so there can be a global movement against climate change. *Earth Hour* and *Earth Day* are good from an awareness point of view but, really, they’re just a drop in the ocean.”

The direction of environmentalism is clearly changing and Matthias is at its helm. To find out more about Matthias Gelber and how you can get involved in his green initiatives, check out greenmanplanet.blogspot.com and join Eco Warriors Malaysia on Facebook.



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