

## INTRODUCTION TO THE ENVIRONMENT

If you get into a car on a hot day when it is parked outside, do you feel hot? Did you notice that it is much hotter inside the car than outside of the vehicle? Why is the interior of the car hot? There are times when the inside of a car gets so hot that it can cook an egg. This is very common, especially in a hot country like Malaysia. We can say that the environment inside the car is hotter than that of outside of the car. Therefore there are two types of environment - natural environment like in a jungle and man-made environment like inside a car.

This is the environment. It is what surrounds us. It is the air we breathe. It is the water we drink. It is the soil which supports us. Our environment can be divided into two very broad categories: the living and the non-living. The Earth is the only planet we know in the Universe where there is life. Life on Earth is unique.

Everything interacts with each other. The river that flows carves a valley for the river to flow. The mountains form a barrier which makes the wind change direction to flow around it. The air filled with water vapour transports water hundreds of miles before releasing it as rain. Thus these objects, which we call non-living, interact with each other.

These non-living objects then interact with living beings. The soil is made up of humus, which is rotting plants. The soil supports plants which in turn help keep the soil in place so that the latter is not blown away by the wind. Plants add oxygen to the air, changing the composition of the air. This oxygen is used by animals to produce energy for them to live and move. The environment is a complex interaction of everything; everything you see.

Did you know that we should consume about 2 litres of water daily to live healthily? You would drink an average of 75,000 litres of water throughout your lifetime. This is more than 230,000 large glasses of water which would not even fit into your house. Did you know that in your lifetime you would consume about 1 part in 1000 of all the available air in the atmosphere? This means that the people living in your neighbourhood would probably consume all the air on the planet in their lifetime, and nothing will be left for others to breathe. However this does not happen since we always have air to breathe.

This is the natural environment which is an 'engine' that recycles. In fact you may be recycling billions of atoms from Sir Isaac Newton's days or even from the dinosaurs' age thousands of years ago as you breathe! There are many 'engines' that do the recycling. One example is a tree. A tree changes carbon dioxide, which we produce, back into oxygen which we consume. One object's waste is another object's food. Nothing is wasted in the natural environment. The natural environment is a recycling plant. This is what makes our air breathable and our water drinkable.

Thus the environment flows within you and I. We are the environment. It is the water that flows through us and keeps us alive as we drink it. It is the air which we breathe flowing into us and out of our body as fast as a single breath. It is the food we eat that is incorporated into our body. It is that which makes our bones. Did you know that our skeleton is replaced with a new skeleton about 14 times in our lifetime? The environment changes us, as we change it. The environment is what we see - its beauty and vibrant colour. It is the environment which we feel

and touch every day. The environment is what we smell like when we are in a rose garden. The environment is what we hear like the songs of birds early in the morning. The environment is what we taste, like the sweetness of cool water on a hot day.

The environment can be destroyed, regenerated and protected. We have the power to destroy it. We have the power to protect it. However we do not have the power to regenerate it. So it is our job not to destroy it but to protect it, so that nature can continue its work to regenerate and recycle - so that the future generation will also have clean air to breathe and safe water to drink.