

# Seeing the big picture

Ethnobotanist Francois Couplan talks about “soft survival”, appreciating weeds, and the survival of the species itself.

By **SUZANNE LAZAROO**  
star2@thestar.com.my

WEEDS are to be marvelled at, says French ethnobotanist Francois Couplan.

“When you grow a garden and there are weeds, this is just Nature’s way of expressing herself,” says the French scientist who has pioneered the concept of “soft survival” using wild plants, as a way to survive the harsh edges of the concrete jungle.

Couplan, 67, is a proponent of all things natural, and has been teaching about the uses of plants since 1975.

“Man is made to eat wild plants, especially leaves. And until agriculture came along, humans had a very varied diet,” he said, in a keynote address at the second Food and Society International Conference in November, held at the Hotel Istana in Kuala Lumpur.

The conference was organised by the Institute of Ethnic Studies (Kita), a national research institute within the National University of Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia).

“Wild leaves have astounding nutritional value, providing many of the micronutrients we need in a balanced form,” said Couplan, whose many titles include the Knight of the Order of Agricultural Merit (France).

His is a living science, with extensive personal experience of living in and with nature on all the continents of the world, and he is a student as much as a teacher, living with and learning from indigenous people all over the world – including the orang asli. From this have come 85 books translated into various languages, as well as over 40 years spent conducting workshops and lectures around the world.

The distillation of his work can be found in Lyon, France, where he has set up the Collège Pratique d’Ethnobotanique. The school has a three-year curriculum aimed at

illuminating the ancient, deep-rooted relationship

between people and plants; Couplan also teaches survival courses on his own land in the French Alps.

“I came up with these courses because there is a need to take more time and go more in-depth on this subject,” he said. “Plus, they allow people to build relationships with each other and to explore together.

The courses include understanding botany, as well as understanding people, from an anatomical, ethnological, etc., point of view.”

There are also basic survival skills taught, and even how to make various Galenic formulations

like balms, tinctures and inks.

His concept of soft survival is about freeing yourself from a day-to-day existence fraught with the barbed edges induced by the urban/suburban jungle, and building a harmonious co-existence with nature.

“We need to look at what plants come naturally (to an area), look beyond just plants that we eat. We need to appreciate them just because they are there,” he said.

Does he feel that there is a contradiction between permaculture, and living with wild plants?

“Not at all. It all depends on the way in which one approaches either – it is a case of adaptation and appreciation,” he said.

That is a mindset that can be adopted anywhere – even in the heart of a city. “Here, walking around in Kuala Lumpur, I see plants everywhere, and feel the connection to them,” he said.

“I do feel that living in the jungle is something everyone should experience and know,” he said. “That is where you can experience

the full strength of nature – and here

in South-East Asia, it is still very strong.” Couplan cautions that it is important to know your way around if you want to go into the jungle – and that means relying on guides like the orang asli or orang asal, who call it home.

There are many ways to realise the vision of soft survival in Malaysia.

“You could set up a school for adults in partnership with a university,” said Couplan. “It is most important to work with children, but first parents and teachers must be prepared.”

He also sees much opportunity and richness in our local ulam, which has vast untapped potential. “It should be promoted via the media, in books and through government programmes,” he said.

The adoption of soft survival is just the starting point. As a result of experiencing this kind of life, an awareness can grow – of the bigger picture, of preserving what needs to be preserved, even of eating natural rather than processed products. This is also why Couplan structures his course in such a way that it “moves from the practical to the theoretical;

from the local to the global; and back and forth.”

“We need to ask the question of ourselves: how do we want to live? By eating as much meat as we do, by cutting down forests to grow soybeans to feed livestock?

“This whole process brings about personal change, and changes in society come from changes in individuals.

“In the end, the issue at hand is the survival of our species,” said Couplan.

“Nature itself is not at stake, it is humans who are at stake. Permaculture and growing plants in a natural way can be seen as a way to save the world, but there needs to be a concept of leaving a space for nature.

“Civilisations are fragile, climate change affects everyone – and we really need to ask the hard questions of ourselves!”



Couplan’s concept of soft survival entails eating and living with wild plants – but it’s also possible to cultivate a mindset of appreciation for nature even in the heart of the city. — JULIE WONG/The Star