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The “Outdoors” Classroom

TAN WEE KIAT

While a lot of learning is acquired within the four walls of the classroom, the learning can be supplemented and complemented by activities outdoors. Many schools have included activities linked to science gardens, mathematics trails, camps, local field trips, overseas tours, etc., to add to the quality of the learning experiences given to their pupils.

An outdoors experience, such as a simple field trip, can make use of resources that are readily accessible and, often, free of charge. The following paragraphs describe one example of a simple field trip.

As the National Institute of Education (NIE) shares a common boundary with the Botanic Gardens I have often asked my teacher-trainees whether they have been to the Botanic Gardens. Invariably, the answer is in the positive. My favourite follow-up question is whether they know the exact location where the first rubber seeds were planted in South-east Asia. One would expect that most, if not all, the teacher-trainees especially those who had majored in Geography, History, Biology or Economics would know exactly where this location is since the rubber industry had played such an important role in the development of this region. However, not everyone is able to give the correct answer; in fact, some are surprised to know that the exact spot is only a short walk from the NIE.

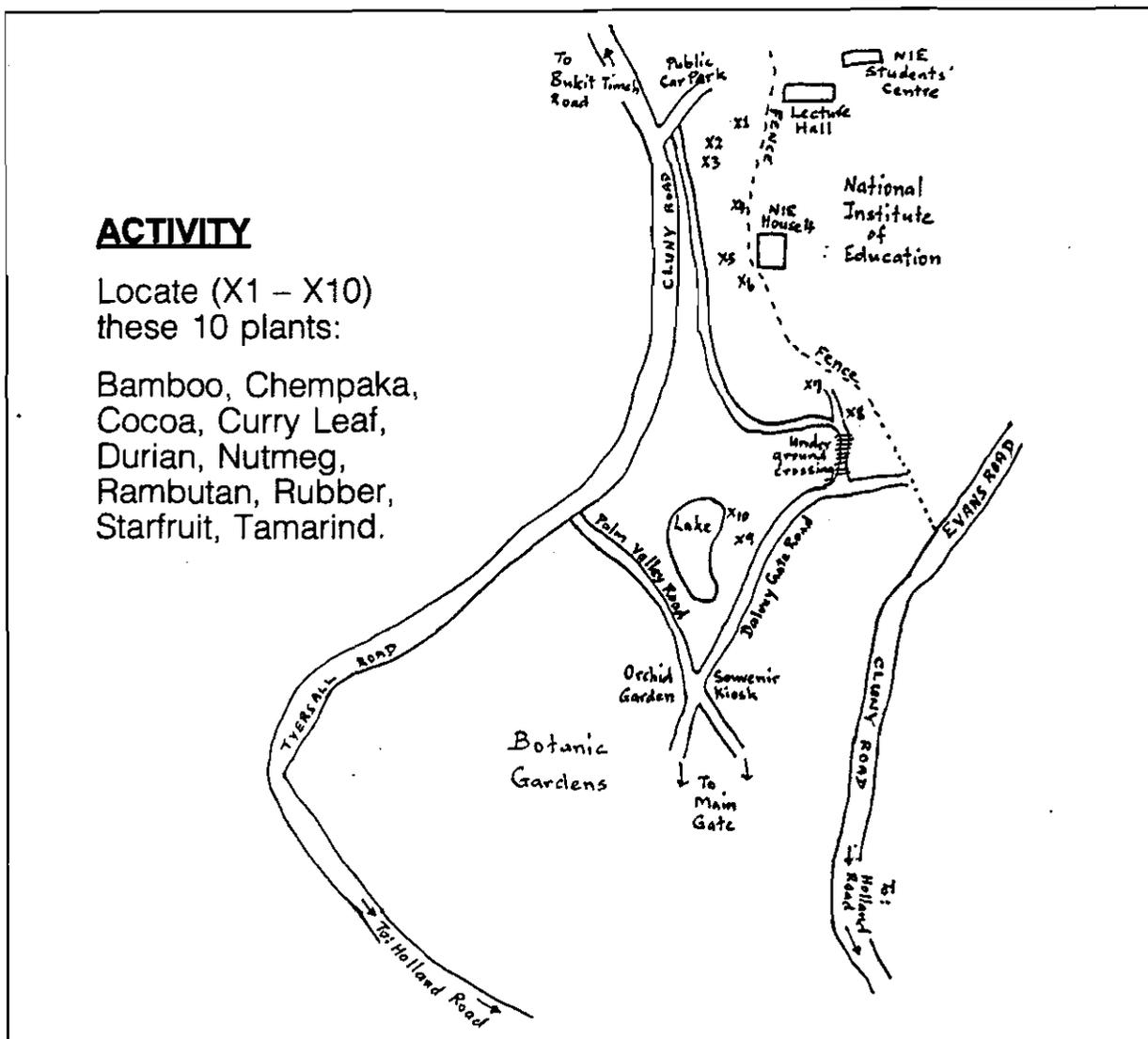
I then announce that after my lecture the following week the class will go on a short field trip to see the VIP (Very Important Plant) as well as a few other important, commercially or sentimentally speaking, plants along the way. The plants that I usually highlight include the following:

1. Rubber (Of course!)
2. Cocoa
3. Nutmeg
4. Curry leaf plant

- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| 5. Tamarind | 6. Durian |
| 7. Rambutan | 8. Chempaka |
| 9. Bamboo | 10. Starfruit |

As active learning is more enduring, and endurable, than passive learning, the activity can be carried out in the following way. Each student is given a sketch map of the area and 10 spots marked with an "X" and numbered from 1 to 10. They are told that while they should try to visit all the 10 spots to find which plant is located at a particular spot, there is no need for all of them to start with the spot numbered "1" on the map. My suggestion is that they start with the numbered spot that corresponds to the last digit of their Identity Card (IC) number. In this way different small groups are formed and they spread out in different directions to hunt for their "treasures".

Here is a sketch map of the area.



At any appropriate time before, during or after, the treasure hunt you can tell them little bits and pieces about the plants, for example,

- Cocoa – for making chocolate, drinks (Van Houten, Milo, Ovaltine)
- Nutmeg – Malay name is "Pala" usually sold by sellers of cut fruits (such vendors used to be referred to as "Buah Pala" - "Buah" is the Malay word for "fruit")
- Curry leaf – as the name implies, is used in curry dishes
- Durian – comes from the Malay word "duri" (thorn)
- Rambutan – comes from the Malay word "rambut" (hair)
- Tamarind – sour fruit "assam" for making the gravy for "mee-siam", Chinese "rojak", etc.
- Starfruit – gaining greater popularity as it is reputed to lower high blood pressure
- Chempaka – flower with a strong fragrance
- Bamboo – giant-sized grass with many uses; not related to the word 'bamboozle'

After all that walking, and story-telling, the teacher-trainees deserve a good rest. Hopefully, they will believe that the use of outdoor activities is a valuable teaching method worth engaging in with their pupils when they become full-fledged teachers!

Note:

Teachers may like to know that there is a "Walk-with-nature: Singapore Botanic Gardens" brochure produced by Hongkong Bank and the National Parks Board. Copies, free-of-charge, are available at the Botanic Gardens office. This brochure describes 45 different

plants, including the rubber tree, but does not give the exact location of the spot where rubber was first planted in South-east Asia.

References

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