

## Meet Matthias Gelber, the 'greenest person' on Earth.

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**W**HAT will it take for one to qualify as the Greenest Person on the Planet? Well, for starters, he has to do the normal things that tree-huggers do, such as trim down waste, buy minimally and wisely, recycle, carry a reusable shopping bag, save energy and use public transport to get around.

Matthias Gelber does all the above plus a whole lot more: he does not own a car, hardly turns on the air-conditioner in his apartment despite living smack in the centre of Kuala Lumpur, started a company that produces building materials which are not harsh on the environment, spreads the green message by giving talks to students and staff of companies, and he plants lots of trees.

All those green habits have earned Gelber, 41, the title of the Greenest Man on the Planet. The German environmental entrepreneur who has been residing in Malaysia for four years, received 51% of the 1,791 votes cast worldwide through the Internet in the award initiated by Canadian organisation 3rdwhale to encourage a green lifestyle.

"Winning the award is a great honour," says Gelber. "No doubt it is a milestone, but it is only the beginning. Winning this competition gives me further commitment and encouragement to inspire others to look after the future of our planet, and the future of our children."

More than 600 people from over 40 countries participated in the award. The contestants were shortlisted to 50 for the public to vote, and then to five finalists.

Simon Fraser University professor Boyd Cohen, the founder of 3rdwhale, says of the award: "The idea is to make stars out of people who go the extra length to live environmentally responsible lifestyles when they have lots of choices that aren't so environmentally responsible. We consider this the American Idol for green people."

For Gelber, the recognition comes with a pod of beluga whales adopted in his name through US nature group Defenders of Wildlife. Also, a Thai charity nominated by Gelber, Plant-A-Tree-Today, will be the beneficiary of a donation based on sales of T-shirts and other items from 3rdwhale.

### Green roots

Gelber's green leanings stem from a childhood in Lippe, a rustic village of 500 people in west Germany. "The village is surrounded by woods and I always enjoy playing outdoors. So that connection with the environment was always there."

He knew from young that he wanted to work in the environment field and studied chemistry to better understand pollution issues and followed that up with a master's in environmental science. He then started an environmental consultancy working with companies on sustainability issues and so was able to turn his passion for the environment into a career.

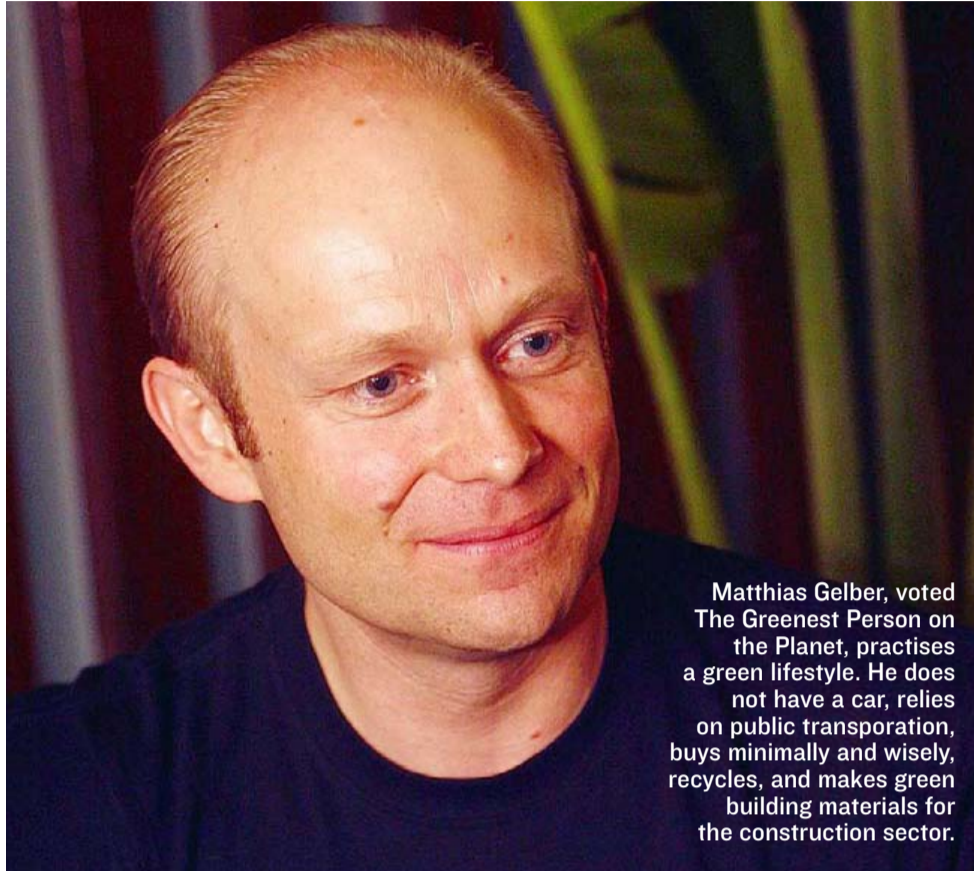
But recent environmental changes spurred him to do more.

"It is clear that we have a problem. Current impacts of climate change is largely human made beside the natural fluctuations. In my village when I was a kid, I always had snow for three to four months. Now, my brother's son and daughter only have a few days each winter if they are lucky. The competition is less about me winning but more about us all working together."

Green living is second nature to Gelber. He has owned a car for only about a total of two years in the past 15. Since moving to Malaysia under the Malaysia My Second Home programme, he has relied on the LRT, buses and taxis to get around. He also chose to live in the city centre to be better-served by public transportation.

And for business trips, he opts for smaller

# Friend of the Earth



Matthias Gelber, voted The Greenest Person on the Planet, practises a green lifestyle. He does not have a car, relies on public transportation, buys minimally and wisely, recycles, and makes green building materials for the construction sector.

hotels where the ecological impact is usually lower due to smaller rooms, less energy wastage and no unnecessary extras like six different towels in the bathroom.

"Sometimes the cleaners will change your towel even if you hang it up. So I put the 'Do not disturb' sign on the door to prevent them from coming in and changing the linens and towels."

On his trips home to Germany, Gelber brings along his used batteries as he knows the toxic waste will be properly handled there. "I just feel uncomfortable throwing them in the trash bin here."

### Carbon capture

For all his green ways, Gelber is also realistic. "I'm not living in a *kampung* just hugging trees. I live in the modern world with modern comforts. So I need to see how I can reduce my footprint."

His frequent flying for work and talks leaves him with a huge carbon imprint, so he offsets that by avidly supporting tree-planting schemes, such as Plant-A-Tree-Today. He also carefully weighs every invitation to speak on conservation, to avoid unnecessary travels.

Ever eager to support green initiatives, he bought 4ha of a sustainable forestry project in Panama three years ago. In this green investment scheme, Forest Finance, trees are planted and harvested sustainably. Profits from the project – Gelber expects a return of over 10% when the trees are harvested in 15 years' time – will be a form of "green pension" for him.

He estimates that all the tree-planting schemes that he supports capture some 200 tonnes of carbon annually – way above the estimated 15 to 20 tonnes that he personally emits from his day-to-day living and travels.

To fulfil modern-day living, Gelber believes the world needs eco-efficient development that enhances our lifestyles, yet does not wreck the environment. For this to happen, he says, three parties must play their parts: government and consumers must demand for green goods and services, and businesses, in turn, must meet that demand.

He says opportunities are aplenty in the emerging low-carbon economy, and predicts that companies with green products and services will be winners. His Germany-based company, Maleki, for instance, is breaking new ground by developing green building materials.

It transforms waste such as blast furnace slag (from steel manufacturing), fly ash (from

coal-fired power plants) and rice husk ash into alternatives to cement.

Gelber sees this as a major contribution towards averting global warming since cement production contributes between 5% and 7% of global greenhouse gases emissions.

### The green path

Gelber asserts that a green lifestyle is not out of reach as most people imagined. The first step towards being a green consumer, he says, is to assess our lifestyles and purchasing habits.

"Recycling is great but it still uses energy. We can avoid recycling by not buying what we don't need. When moving house recently, I had boxes of books. I decided to stop buying new books until I've read the ones I already have. I don't buy too many things to avoid generating waste. I have also disciplined myself that I don't need the latest gadget but to live with things that are older but can still do the job."

People should also analyse the waste that they throw out, for from there, they can determine how to shrink the trash pile. "I did that and found that I throw out lots of plastic drink bottles. So I bought glass bottles to fill from a water dispenser, and all the plastic bottles disappeared."

People should also be more conscious about their carbon footprint, he adds. "Most people think that electricity comes from the plug. We need to make the connection that electricity comes from power plants that burn oil, gas or coal."

To mark his receiving the award, Gelber intends to, well, plant more trees. He has pledged to buy another 1,000 trees in the Plant-A-Tree-Today scheme to kick-start a project to have one million trees planted worldwide by Earth Day on April 22 next year.

■ To find out more, go to: [www.3rdwhale.com](http://www.3rdwhale.com), <http://greenmanplanet.blogspot.com>, [www.plant-a-tree-today.org](http://www.plant-a-tree-today.org)

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