

Being Gaia-friendly comes naturally to her

SINGAPORE — Staying in a perspex room with little in the way of entertainment is hardly a way to spend your weekend, but three people did just that. And 24 hours later, one emerged as the most Gaia-friendly person of the year.

The MediaCorp Gaia Life Challenge 2010 winner was organic food cafe owner Christina Hardie, 42.

"You feel a little bit like a hamster in a cage," she said. "Some chaps

came up and asked me to turn the fan on, and I said: 'I'm good, I'm all right'. I think people are very amused by all this."

The idea of the contest was to use as little electricity as possible, which meant no television or computer. The contestants were also tested on their knowledge of topics such as water consumption, recycling and energy reduction.

These questions were no trouble

for Ms Hardie, who recycles and brings her own shopping bags.

"If you've been living this sort of life for quite a long time, it comes naturally to you. You don't have to think about it."

The three contestants were picked from some 200 applicants.

Ms Hardie won \$5,000 and some household appliances. The other two contestants also won household appliances.



MediaCorp Press managing director Patrick Yong (extreme left), presenting a cheque to Ms Christina Hardie (centre). OOI BOON KEONG

Singapore's libel laws are sound: Ministry of Law

Lawyers say no cases of 'libel tourism' here, despite US senator's claims

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SINGAPORE — The Ministry of Law has refuted a comment by a United States lawmaker that Singapore's defamation laws — along with those in countries like Australia, Indonesia, England and Brazil — are "weak".

In an email response to MediaCorp, a MinLaw spokeswoman disagreed with Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy's comment, saying the view "will not change our position on defamation".

Last week, the US proposed legislation that would shield its writers and publishers from "libel tourism", with Senator Leahy naming Singapore as one of several countries whose "weak libel protections" attracted foreigners to file defamation suits against US journalists and authors in those countries, where they hoped to get a more favourable judgement.

The Bill, if passed, would prevent US federal courts from recognising or enforcing a foreign judgment in a defamation case, in line with the constitutional first amendment which guarantees the freedom of speech.

The MinLaw spokeswoman noted that the purpose of defamation law was to protect personal reputation, which is "as valuable as personal property", from false

■ POLITICIANS' SUITS AN ISSUE OF 'MORAL VICTORY'

Would a law deterring libel tourism have an effect on defamation suits by Singapore politicians against US-based foreign media?

The impact is minimal if the suit is won here and the defendants have assets here to be seized or frozen, said National University of Singapore Adjunct Professor Kevin Tan.

Currently, courts usually help other courts of good repute enforce overseas judgements, he said. But once the new law is enforced, US courts will be prevented from enforcing a foreign judgement.

Nonetheless Mr Andy Lem, a partner at Harry Elias Partnership, notes the "primary motivation" for a defamation suit is to vindicate one's reputation, and Government leaders will continue to assert and protect their rights and reputation.

Singapore Management University

Assistant Professor Jack Lee agreed: "The moral victory of having succeeded in the defamation claim before the Singapore courts is sufficient."

Last year, Review Publishing Company, publisher of the now-defunct Hong Kong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and editor Hugo Restall were ordered to pay a total of \$405,000 in damages and legal costs to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew after losing a defamation suit. The magazine is owned by American company Dow Jones and Co.

In March, the *International Herald Tribune's* publisher, The New York Times Co, the editor of *IHT* global editions, and the article's writer Philip Bowring paid damages and apologised to PM Lee, MM Lee and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong. The matter did not go to court. ALICIA WONG

attacks. A person who feels he has been defamed may seek to vindicate his reputation through a lawsuit, and it was up to the accuser to prove his allegations, she said.

"These are the central principles underpinning Singapore defamation law. Political leaders, prominent businessmen, and ordinary citizens all benefit equally from its protection. It ensures that while we go about our daily lives, our reputations are protected," said the spokeswoman.

The defamation cases decided in

Singapore courts are matters of public record, she added: "The reality is that they are sound and have stood the test of public scrutiny."

Local lawyers and legal experts told MediaCorp they have not heard of cases of libel tourism here.

Singapore Management University Assistant Professor of law Jack Lee said he has not seen instances of libel tourism in law reports over the last 10 years, while a partner at Colin Ng and Partners, Mr Peter Low, said:

"It is an issue bandied around in the United Kingdom, Europe, but not in Singapore."

However, compared to the US, Singapore's libel law could be considered weaker, they noted.

In the US, a newspaper is not liable for libel of a politician or public figure unless "actual malice" is proven, said Adjunct Professor Kevin Tan from the National University of Singapore. "There is no such test in Singapore."

In Australia, New Zealand and the UK, newspapers may be held immune from libel suits if it can be shown they practised "responsible journalism", he added. This argument has been rejected by Singapore's Court of Appeal.

Pointing out that politicians can refute inaccurate allegations through press statements, Asst Prof Lee added, "there is something to be said for having stronger protection for political communication".

But, he noted, courts here are "generally quite conservative" and do not agree that defamation law should be modified for greater emphasis on free speech and expression.

Still, a defendant has legal defences such as fair comment, said Mr Andy Lem, a partner at Harry Elias Partnership.

The Court of Appeal, Singapore's highest court, has also observed that local political and social conditions should be considered in deciding on the balance between constitutional free speech and protection of reputation, he added.

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