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Debate over the price of being green

NMP urges Govt to do more to protect nature. Economic gains will make it possible, says minister

By Lynn Lee

THE issue of striking a balance between pursuing economic development and conserving Singapore's natural environment saw a spirited exchange in the House involving Nominated MP Geh Min and Second National Development Minister Lim Swee Say.

Dr Geh, the president of the Nature Society, urged the Government to implement laws to protect natural reserves here in the same way it protects fiscal reserves.

Speaking during the debate on the Parks and Trees Bill, she described Singapore as 'a country with a hinterland', whose seas, offshore islands and nature areas should not be seen purely as space into which to expand the city.

'They are repositories of our valuable biodiversity and should be treated as such,' she said.

There were more species of trees in the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve than in the whole of the North American continent and Singapore's coral reefs have far greater diversity of marine life than the Great Barrier Reef, she said.

The potential scientific and economic value of Singapore's nature areas has not been properly recognised, she added.

Roads, reservoirs and housing were necessary, she acknowledged. But competition for scarce land and not assessing the impact of...
development on the environment often result in the 'sacrifice' of the natural ecosystem.

The Government, she said, had to make carefully considered decisions as it was 'trustee of the lands for present and future generations of Singaporeans'.

Responding, Mr Lim said that while he agreed that Singapore should do what it can to preserve its natural capital, he did not see how choosing to conserve at the expense of using land would make the country 'more sustainable'.

He pointed out that it was because of Singapore's economic gains that it could channel resources towards preserving its natural areas.

'It costs us millions of dollars every year to keep Singapore green,' said Mr Lim, who held the Environment portfolio previously.

'So if we were to say that every natural value - every tree, every plant - has to be left untouched, then we are not going to be able to pursue our economic value creation. If we are not able to create economic value, then where do we find the value to preserve our natural value?'

He argued that Singapore recognised the need for balance between using its limited land resources and preserving nature, 'and I think we are doing a very good job'.

'I do share Dr Geh Min's point that we need to do whatever we can to preserve the natural capital of Singapore and better still, to create natural value as we move along.

'But at the same time, I just want to remind the House that it's an ongoing challenge to balance between preserving natural capital and meeting land use requirement.'

Earlier, he cited his experience at the World Summit on Sustainable Development two years ago and said the conclusion reached among all parties was a simple one:

'If we were to keep the world moving forward, we need to harmonise all three areas of economic development, social progress and environmental management.'

This was, again, an ongoing challenge for the Government, he said.

He also said that while Singapore had to sometimes subtract from its 'natural capital' for economic purposes, the country did invest financial gains to further boost the natural environment.

A case in point is the proposed development of the second Botanical Gardens at Marina South. 'That will cost us hundreds of millions of dollars and I would believe that that is a good example of how we are using economic value to create value in natural capital.'

Mr Lim also responded to Dr Amy Khor (Hong Kah GRC), who was worried that a change requiring architects and engineers to apply as well to the National Parks Board (NParks) for approval of greenery provision would delay their projects.

He assured that the extra step would not cause any delay as the application process remains the same. 'All they need to do now is to add one more item to the distribution list - and it's NParks. Where NParks' processing is concerned, it is no different from before,' he said.