Volunteers patrol park to stop illegal coral collectors

By Joyce Teo

TIRED of waiting for someone to put a stop to illegal coral collecting at Labrador Park, volunteers have come together to police the park in the hope of saving marine life.

'Corals are being picked up all the time,' said Mr Grant Pereira, head of the Green Volunteers Network, an arm of the Singapore Environment Council.

'Instead of pointing fingers, we decided to set up the Labrador Park Watch about six months ago.'

Made up of volunteers from the network, Nature Society and a National University of Singapore group called Blue Waters, the group patrols the beach twice a month during low tide with at least one park ranger.

They look out for people who illegally take corals home for their aquariums, or for sale.

While there is no data showing how rampant coral collecting is, Mr Pereira said that it has been going on for a long time and is getting worse.

'We have seen people going there with hammers. Some of them said they have been doing it for months and years,' he said.

'We tell them it’s wrong to collect the corals and try to educate them.'

One major achievement, two months ago, was to get the authorities to install a gate where visitors access the beach from the park. The gate opens from 10am to 8pm daily.

Still, stronger rules are needed to stop the pilfering.

'We can either impose a big fine or name and shame them,' said Mr Pereira. 'But no one has ever been charged.'

Nominated MP Geh Min, who cited the volunteers' work in Parliament yesterday, believes a combination of law enforcement
and public education is needed.

She raised the topic of illegal coral collecting at Labrador Park when she noted that there was no central coordinating body looking after Singapore's marine areas.

Water quality and monitoring, for example, is handled by the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore; pollution and oil spills by the Environment and Water Resources Ministry; corals come under the Singapore Land Authority which, in turn, is under the Law Ministry; nature conservation is under the National Parks Board; and the Urban Redevelopment Authority handles coastal development and land reclamation.

Dr Geh applauded the move in the new legislation to give the National Parks Board more power to protect marine areas but suggested that areas with valuable marine biodiversity be gazetted as nature reserves.