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Jan 26, 2005  
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### Economy v Environment? No, it's about achieving balance

By Asad Latif

NOMINATED MP Geh Min was sagely yesterday.

To listen to her was to be reminded of the ancient saying that nobody ever owns land, but that one generation inherits it merely to pass it on to the next.

She spoke not only about land but also about coral reefs, marine plants and animals in a defence of Singapore's natural habitat that was all the more compelling for the calm and studious tone in which it was delivered.

In arguing against the idea that Singapore has no natural resources, the president of the Nature Society cited a plethora of facts and statistics that were as thick as a flourishing tropical rainforest.

Some are well known, such as that Singapore has more species of trees in the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve than are found on the whole North American continent.

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But other statistics are no less dramatic:

- Singapore's coral reefs, the marine equivalent of tropical rainforests, have far greater diversity of marine life than the Great Barrier Reef.
- More than 8,000 species of marine plants and animals have been recorded in Singapore waters alone. Several more have yet to be identified and are likely to be new species. This is despite more than 60 per cent of Singapore's coral reefs having been destroyed.

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- Singapore's mangroves have more than 2,000 species of recorded plants and animals.

But what clinched Dr Geh's argument for treating biodiversity with the respect it deserves was a 1997 study, which put a dollar amount on the ecosystem services that nature provides to humanity without charging a cent in return.

The contribution was US\$33 trillion (S\$54 trillion) or more every year - an amount that was nearly twice the 1997 combined gross national product of all countries in the world.

Her demonstration of how the environment contributes to the economy moved the ecological debate away from stale economy-versus-environment arguments.

She advanced an economic rationale for nature conservation that made sense, quite apart from educational or recreational or spiritual reasons for doing so.

Replying to her, Second Minister for National Development Lim Swee Say agreed that Singapore is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of its natural capital.

He added the statistic that the number of tree species in the Botanic Gardens was more than what can be found in the whole of Europe.

And Dr Amy Khor (Hong Kah GRC) noted that more than 300,000 trees and shrubs had been planted islandwide since 1971 - a sign that the greening of Singapore is not a slogan but a part of determined efforts to keep the urban sprawl at bay.

Few will quibble with the protection of selected mature tree-lined roads and conserved trees that the House passed into law yesterday.

But back to the issue of development and conservation.

Mr Lim disagreed with Dr Geh that over the years, Singapore had been subtracting value from the natural capital that it has.

He said that in Singapore, a small island with limited land resources, the core issue was the balance between the utilisation of land and natural capital. Indeed, he said Singapore's economic gains allowed it to channel resources into preserving its natural areas.

It literally costs millions of dollars every year to keep Singapore green.

True, indeed.

The point about the exchange between the minister and the environmentalist was not who was right. Both were, though they differed on the way to achieve this balance.

For example, Dr Geh said pointedly that she did not contest the need for roads, housing and reservoirs. But she argued that a legal framework for inter-agency consultation and coordination at the conceptual stage of a development, among other things, would allow for a more comprehensive and less competitive and wasteful use of scarce land.

The question, then, is how a particular decision - on building an expressway that cuts through a nature reserve, for example - affects the environment and whether or not the economic and social goals of that decision can be achieved with the least effect on the environment.

This debate will no doubt continue.

What happened yesterday is that it took it a step closer to being a discussion based on a 'holistic' - the minister's word - appreciation of how economic development, social progress and environmental management must move in tandem.

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