



Birds of a feather: A flock of plovers fly through Singapore's Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve as they migrate between Siberia and Australia. *Photo: AFP*

Invasion site becomes unlikely sanctuary

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By Karl Malakunas

Singapore - An unlikely patch of swampland that the Japanese used to launch their World War 2 invasion of Singapore is once again emerging as a site of national importance - this time as a wildlife sanctuary.

In this land-scarce city-state famous for its economic success and urbanisation, the 130 hectares of mudflats and mangroves are proving vital as a refuge for animals as well as an environmental educational tool.

The Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, at the northern edge of the country, is also part of the East Asian Migratory Flyway in which countless birds migrate each year from Siberia and China to Australia and New Zealand, and back again.

'They are finding it a safe place'

protection three years later.

It has since become one of Singapore's premier nature reserves and was recognised in 2002 by the global environment group, Wetlands International, as a site of international importance.

Another measure of its success is the increasing number of wildlife that are calling Sungei Buloh - which means Bamboo River in Malay - their home.

A family of smooth otters, a 1,5-metre crocodile and even a wild boar have moved into the reserve over recent years, making their homes alongside mud lobsters, green crested lizards, tree ducks, mudskipper fish and kingfisher birds.

"They are finding it a safe place, they can get food and seek refuge and they can breed here," said National Parks Board senior outreach officer Linda Goh.

'They can get food and seek

Goh said Sungei Buloh was important in trying to conserve Singapore's biodiversity, which suffered as the



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refuge and they can breed here'

country sought economic development through projects such as converting islands into industrial parks.

According to a Nature Society of Singapore report from 2000, 39 percent of all the nation's native coastal plants are extinct and only four percent of mangroves remain.

The report said 38 of Singapore's 91 native mammals are extinct, while more than half of the rest are considered at risk. Thirty-four percent of the nation's birds are also extinct while another 38 percent are at risk.

Goh said an equally important role of Sungei Buloh was to educate Singaporeans, with the reserve now attracting 100 000 visitors a year, at least a third of whom are school children.

"Often they (children) don't have any idea where chickens come from - they think they come from the supermarket. But then they come here and they see the jungle fowls," Goh said.

Another important environmental lesson has to do with the amount of litter the tide washes into the mangroves each day from the adjoining Johor Strait that separates Singapore and Malaysia.

"One of the big problems we have is marine litter," Goh said, listing plastic straws and plastic bags as the most common forms of garbage.

Goh said the reserve organises regular clean-up activities for children to emphasise the importance of recycling - which is not widely practised in Singapore - and to teach them the value of the mangroves.

"Mangroves are the breeding ground for crabs and prawns so we tell the children that without the mangroves there would be no seafood. With Singaporeans, you talk to them about food and they listen," she said.

There are other nature reserves in Singapore that are also helping to maintain the nation's rich, tropical flora and fauna, but Sungei Buloh holds a unique position because of its place in World War II history.

After marching down what was then Malaya, Japanese troops crossed the Johor Strait by boat on February 9, 1942 and fought their way through the thick forest of what is now Sungei Buloh and the surrounding areas.

Six days later the colonial British rulers, who had infamously believed Singapore to be an impregnable fortress, had surrendered to the Japanese.

► **This article was originally published on June 28, 2004**

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