

# Operation clean-up

## S'poreans take environment too much for granted

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ON JUNE 5, millions of people around the world marked World Environment Day (WED) with rallies, marches, bicycle parades, concerts, forums, tree-planting projects, clean-up campaigns and public pledges to save the environment.

However, the most important environmental event of the year seemed to barely register on the nation's psyche here. Indeed, had it not been for the efforts of local environmental groups, the WED would have been forgotten.

Green issues' advocate Howard Shaw said apathy towards the future of the environment is "symptomatic" of an ignorance of existing problems. "We take our environment for granted. There is very little motivation to improve," he said.

This is apparently reflected in the way Singaporeans maintain environmentally-unsustainable lifestyles, said Mr Shaw, the executive director of the Singapore Environment Council.

"Our waste is removed so efficiently that most of us have no idea how much we generate," he said, revealing that each person in Singapore throws out about 1.3kg of waste every day. Enough rubbish is generated to fill 1,100 garbage trucks a year.

Environmental activist Grant Pereira, who leads beach and mangrove clean-ups twice a month, estimated that volunteers collected as many as 80 "large" bags of litter each time.

The National Environment Agency (NEA), though, was optimistic about achieving a 60-per-cent recycling rate by 2012, up from the current 47-per-cent rate.

Since the national waste-recycling programme started in 2001, Singapore has produced 10 per cent less waste – thus extending the lifespan of the Semakau landfill for 10 years.

But what about Singapore's long-term capacity for environmental sustainability?

Over the next eight years, Singapore's environmental blueprint for sustainable development, the Singapore Green Plan (SGP) 2012, will aim to fulfil 155 action programmes under six action-programme committees (APC).

Launched in August 2002, the green plan updates the original 1992 version and combines the efforts of the NEA and other statutory boards such as the National Parks Board (NParks) and the Public Utilities Board (PUB).

The NEA chief executive officer Lam Joon Khoi said the state of Singapore's environment was something to be proud of and was pleased with the SGP's achievements over the past 12 years.

"Our air quality is one of the best in the world, our tap water is safe to drink, our waste is collected daily and disposed of properly and we enjoy a high standard of public health," he said.

Environmentalists lauded the principle of the green plan, but bemoaned its over-emphasis on brown issues. Conservation objectives read more like a "report card" than a serious action plan, said

Mr Pereira. "Where are the detailed programmes and precise targets?" he asked.

The Nature Society of Singapore's conservation chairman Dr Ho Hua Chew said progress had been too slow: "We are way behind on action programmes."

Twelve years since the first SGP was implemented, there are still no park rangers and management plans in place. And this is not possible until the area size and boundaries of official nature areas are demarcated.

"Nature is identified as important, but it can't just be left and forgotten," he said. "What if people start poaching or trapping animals or the areas are developed? Nobody will be the wiser."

Dr Ho proposed designated nature areas to double to 10 per cent of the total land area. Besides the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, Bukit Timah, Central Catchment and Labrador Nature Reserves, the other 18 nature areas should also be legally protected, he said.

Aquatic habitats such as Pulau Hantu and Chek Jawa, which are threatened by reclamation and dredging activities, should also be gazetted as marine reserves, he said.

Already, 60 per cent of the coral reefs have been lost through reclamation and only 1 per cent of the original mangrove remains today.

"Singapore ratified the United

Nations Biodiversity Convention in 1992, but one of the serious faults of the Green Plan has been weak biodiversity conservation," he added.

The NParks chief executive officer and the Conserving Nature APC chairman Dr Leong Chee Chiew preferred not to make any promises regarding land use. In an email reply, he told TODAY that the NParks would only make "informed decisions ... where necessary" after a list of areas "with high biodiversity" had been compiled.

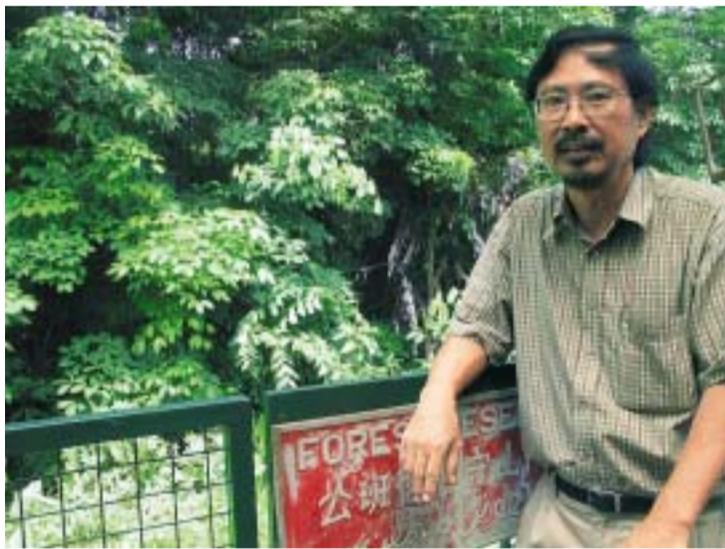
However, marine biologist Loh Tse-Lynn said the NParks might be good at spearheading environmental initiatives, but action plans set for marine conservation in the SGP 2012 were "weak" and "non-committal".

The research assistant at the National University of Singapore added that having to deal with a host of statutory boards responsible for Singapore's marine environment further complicated conservation work.

"Hypothetically, to preserve Pulau Hantu, one has to go through the Singapore Land Authority, the Maritime and Port Authority, the NParks and the PUB. Sometimes, what one agency does may not be transmitted across all levels."

But, rather than depend on the Government to ensure the continued survival of the environment, it is Singaporeans who wield the power to make a difference. Take the most cited example of collective will, Chek Jawa on Pulau Ubin. In 2001, a public outcry from nature lovers halted a reclamation project days before work was to begin.

Urged Dr Ho: "Everything lies in the hands of the people. Singaporeans should be more active, speak up and voice their concerns publicly."



Dr Ho Hua Chew, the chairman of Nature Society of Singapore's conservation committee, feels progress in conservation has been too slow and Singapore is way behind on action programmes.



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