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Nov 11, 2005
PEOPLE & POLITICS

Clean and green is not green enough

So says Dr Ho Hua Chew, who chairs the conservation committee of the Nature Society. Singapore needs to go beyond the 'brown' issues of pollution and recycling and focus on the green issues of nature conservation, he tells Aaron Low.

TELL Singaporeans their tiny homeland has plenty of countryside and they would laugh it off.



ONE WITH NATURE: The serious Dr Ho Hua Chew transforms into a cheerful and chatty person, like a boy in his favourite candy store, when he spots his top nature spots at Khatib Bongsu near Yishun. -- **STEPHANIE YEOW**

But Dr Ho Hua Chew is not joking. In fact, he estimates that 30 to 40 per cent of Singapore is covered by such 'countryside' - vast tracts of greenery that lie dormant. These are the areas the Nature Society has been fighting hard to preserve as 'nature areas'.

'I'm talking about mangroves, savannahs and scrublands. They provide the habitat for a large number of species of birds, snakes, insects and plants,' says Dr Ho, a former philosophy

professor who is in his late 50s.

The subject is close to his heart - and his home.

A small gate in the back of his double-storey terrace house in Thomson opens to a pathway that leads almost immediately into the central catchment nature reserve with three reservoirs.

But there are many more of such wooded areas, insists Dr Ho as he takes this reporter to Khatib Bongsu near Yishun in his Subaru Forrester car.

Here, the conservation activist is like a boy in his favourite candy store. His serious and intense demeanour transforms into a cheerful and chatty persona, eager to point out his top choices.

Every path is familiar as he takes a turn towards the still ponds that glisten in the afternoon sun or the flora and fauna that brighten the popular tracks. Without missing a step, he identifies the plants, from the railway creeper that grows on the edges of the road to the elephant grass that stands as high as an adult.

A shrill, gurgling call catches his attention and he points to a tree: a flame-back woodpecker, with its distinctive golden back and red crest on its head, is perched on a branch.

Almost rhetorically, he says: 'I think Singaporeans need the open space to get away from the concrete jungles they live in.'

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Nature has been an integral part of Dr Ho's life since boyhood, when he would roam the forests that border the Bukit Timah kampung where he lived.

In 1971, in his mid-20s, he joined the Nature Society. However, it was not until the mid-1980s that he became a conservation activist.

So passionate is he in his quest that he did two master's degrees - in applied and landscape ecology - in the late 1990s to arm himself with the knowledge to effectively head the society's conservation committee.

Every weekend will see Dr Ho wandering about his beloved countryside, which he believes Singaporeans would treasure if they knew such nature areas existed. 'We just need to get the relevant authorities to open them up to the public,' he says.

These nature areas are also important in providing extra foraging grounds for the expanding wildlife that populates these reserves.

They are also important habitats for birds flying in from Malaysia, says Dr Ho.

Conservation and green issues have become increasingly important in Singapore in the past 15 years. The annual Clean and Green week was introduced in 1990, while the latest Singapore Green Plan 2012 highlights recycling and pollution issues.

Nature activists believe the efforts have paid off, as even heartlanders turn out regularly for nature tours.

Last Sunday, the cause received an added fillip when Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew called on Singaporeans to do their part in preserving the earth.

He said humankind was consuming too much and destroying the environment at the same time.

'If we go on at this rate, I believe mankind is in jeopardy,' he warned at a community event to mark the month-long Clean and Green Week activities, which began on Nov 5.

Dr Ho welcomed Mr Lee's attention on the environment and saw it as an opportunity for nature groups to be more proactive in engaging the Government.

'The Government used to be very distant in their dealings with us, excluding us from the planning process and alerting us only at the last minute,' he says.

But the situation has improved, with agencies such as National Parks Board and the National Environment Agency seeking feedback:

'For example, when they decided to open up Pulau Semakau for nature-related activities, they invited us to do surveys and studies to help them plan,' he says.

Still, there is room for improvement, he adds.

Dr Ho wants the focus to move away from 'brown' issues of air pollution, recycling and cleaning of the water supply, to green issues that emphasise conservation or preservation of natural habitats such as forests, jungles and marine enclaves.

Why are green issues important? 'For one, the conservation of jungles and forests is one of the ways to stop global warming. We need large tracts of forests and jungles to absorb the carbon dioxide, which is the main contributor to global warming,' he says.

The next campaign? It will be over marine areas, as the reclamation plans for the southern islands will pose a risk to the coral reefs there, says Dr Ho.

Marine conservation has been neglected and there is no comprehensive law to protect marine life, he adds.

'And shamefully, we still don't have a marine nature park.'

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Tragic consequences if we do not conserve

• The current Clean and Green Week celebrations have been an annual event since 1990. Is it a good platform to raise awareness of environmental issues?

So far, it's been good. But more can be done. There is still a lack of focus on green issues, like saving

the wildlife and their natural habitats, such as mangroves and forests, here.

These issues are of global importance. For example, saving forests is important because it absorbs carbon dioxide from the air.

Destroying the forests will lead to a greater concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which is a major contributor to global warming. Global warming affects the weather and is the cause for many natural disasters like hurricane Katrina and famines.

We also want to preserve the countless variety of life forms as it is a vast potential resource for medicine, which has hardly been exploited yet.

• As the population grows and the economy develops, is the conservation fight becoming a losing battle?

I don't think so. If you look at the 25,000 signatures collected to save the Senoko Bird Sanctuary 10 years ago, it was clear people believed that there is a need to conserve nature. Just look at the crowds that throng the canopy walk at MacRitchie when it was opened this year. Crowds of Singaporeans are still queueing to take the walk every weekend.

Also, look at the long lists of bookings for Chek Jawa, a marine habitat, on Pulau Ubin. That people bother to walk and sweat under the sun rather than spend the day at the mall says something about Singaporeans' need to connect with nature.

Singaporeans need a refuge from the concrete jungle we all live in. And when they find this green oasis, they come. So we have support on the ground.

• What about the decision makers? Do you see increasing support from them?

Yes, to some extent. If you think about Chek Jawa, senior government officials went down to the site to visit. That was surely an indication of their interest in protecting the natural environment.

The Government's decision to open Pulau Semakau, Singapore's landfill, for nature appreciation and activity is another indication of strong governmental support for green issues. And, of course, there is Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew who spoke wholeheartedly on the issue on Sunday.

• Did MM Lee's speech take you by surprise?

No. MM Lee was the pioneer in transforming Singapore into a Garden City. I thought it was timely.

One thing we need to remember is that we, Singaporeans, consume as much energy and resources as our Western counterparts. We need to cut down if we are to help slow down global warming and habitat destruction.

MM Lee talked about going for sustainable development, which is the buzzword among many environmentalists nowadays.

But it cannot be achieved if we don't take into account the cost of our economic growth in terms of pollution and degradation of our environment both in and out of Singapore.

• How has the relationship between the Nature Society and the Government been for the past two decades?

Things have been improving over the past 10 years.

In the old days, when we put up a proposal for nature conservation, the Government will reply with a 'thank you' note and say it will consider the proposal. But what happens usually after that is anybody's guess. The tendency then was for meetings and dialogue sessions to be called only when we made some noise in the media.

Nowadays, it is proactive. It calls us for meetings when there is a project affecting or likely to affect a nature area. The Government is definitely more willing to listen and get feedback.

However, the feedback seems useful only for adjusting the peripherals, as in the case of the Kranji golf course project.

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