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# How much is natural heritage worth?

By Lee Poh Onn

THE recent decision to set up a second botanic garden at Marina Bay is another step promoting the importance of nature conservation here. Sited right in the centre of the new downtown area, it will enhance the landscape of the otherwise mundane business district.

But Singapore must do even more to protect existing natural habitats.

Granted that Singapore is land scarce and that there other considerations (housing, industrial, commercial, national) that need to be taken into account, but more consideration should be given to the possible irreversible damage that urban redevelopment planners can unwittingly impose on existing nature areas. What is gone will be gone forever, and no amount of money can bring back our natural heritage.

Nature areas - as reported in the Park and Waterbodies Plan submitted to the Minister for National Development in November 2002 - create a sense of openness, space, diversity, ownership, and community, engender a sense of belonging, provide opportunities for recreation, and create a sense of rootedness.

In 2003, the National Parks Board in Singapore managed around 1,700 ha of parks, park connectors (links built to connect major parks, for example, jogging and bicycle tracks), and open spaces, as well as 2,839 ha of nature reserves.

Singapore has a high level of biodiversity, comprising 1,006 species of fungi, 2,697 species of plants, 364 species of birds, 451 species of crabs and shrimps, 935 species of insects, and 150 species that have yet to be studied in detail according to the January 2004 Singapore National Assessment Report for the Barbados Plan of Action.

Efforts to set aside Sungei Buloh as a mangrove and bird sanctuary, now legally protected and known as the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, should be applauded. It is the first South-east Asian site to be inducted into the East Asian Australasian Shorebird site network by Wetlands International in 2002.

Other improvements the Government has undertaken since the 1990s include the extension of the Bukit Timah nature reserve by 43.8 ha, realigning the Seletar Expressway to limit damage on the Nee Soon Swamp Forest, the reforestation of degraded areas in the central catchment area, and revegetation at Kent Ridge.

But the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) estimates that at least 10 per cent of land areas should be set aside for nature conservation if biodiversity is to be protected.

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Herein lies a rather uneasy thought.

Forests presently account for more than 6 per cent of Singapore's land area, and land protected as parks and other reserves around 4.5 per cent. The Government's decision to set aside only 5 per cent of Singapore's land area (3,130ha) as nature areas lies short of IUCN's recommendation. And, only 3 per cent of these areas are protected by current legislation.

Perhaps it has been difficult to justify the conservation of natural areas given the pressing needs of development, but natural heritage areas bring in the tourist dollar too.

And nature areas have intrinsic value, which can be given more weight by quantifying in dollar terms the benefits they afford.

After all, it is not impossible to attach a dollar value to our natural heritage given the economic tools that are available to price such areas. There are various well established methodologies which have been applied to valuing environmental amenities, and have been used in Singapore in the past as well.

What conservationists need to do now is to deploy them more rigorously to persuade policymakers that a new development project may adversely affect Singapore's well-being.

When quantified costs and benefits of the conservation option against the development option are put in their hands, policymakers can make better judgments as to the trade-offs between them.

I urge local conservationists to now carry out some form of monetary valuation to persuade policymakers and the public that natural areas matter to our collective well-being.

**The writer is a fellow at the Institute of South-east Asian Studies.**

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