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Jan 31, 2005

### Sea warriors with a passion to preserve

**They form 3 groups to protect marine life here from harm and educate public**  
**By Radha Basu**

AT LEAST three conservation groups have sprung up in the last year bound by one abiding passion - to preserve Singapore's marine wealth for posterity.

They not only work to fend off thieves, but also to spread the word via the Internet, by organising tours and by other means about the huge treasure trove of sea creatures in local waters.

The biggest battle this ragtag army of volunteers faces is ignorance.

'It's difficult to get people to appreciate the beauty and importance of something they don't even know exists,' said marine biologist Loh Tse-Lynn, 26.

The Blue Water Volunteers he started last year with about a dozen others now have around 200 members, who survey coral reefs and report on damage.

They are helped in their quest by the two kindred groups.

One is 11-month-old Hantu Bloggers, which focuses on protecting Pulau Hantu.

The other is the Labrador Park Watch initiative, which is trying to stop the theft of corals from the southern Singapore beach.

'We have caught men equipped with buckets and hammers, recklessly breaking the corals,' said teacher Mindy Neo, 26, of the latter. She leads the patrols at the nature reserve.

Sometimes, an explanation is enough to stop the illegal harvesting.

More often than not, they have to call in National Parks Board rangers, who also patrol the park.

Although Singapore has lost more than 60 per cent of its live coral habitat, it still has about 54 sq km of reef, about a tenth the size of the mainland.

Most of the corals are in a cluster of about 20 islands around Sentosa that include Pulau Hantu, Kusu, St John's, Semakau and the Sisters islands.

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But they are under threat from land reclamation and dredging activities.

The groups have a supporter in Nature Society president and Nominated Member of Parliament Geh Min, who on Jan 25, made an impassioned speech in Parliament on the need to preserve the island's coral reefs.

The 8,000 species of plants and animals recorded here mean Singapore has a greater diversity of marine life than Australia's Great Barrier Reef, she said.

Volunteers are also using the Internet as a tool.

National University of Singapore researcher Jani Thuaiabah from the Blue Water Volunteers (www.bluewatervolunteers.org) and freelance writer Debbie Ng from the Hantu Bloggers ( habitatnews.nus.edu.sg/news/pulauhantu/2004/06/whussup-hantu-bloggers.html) regularly post photographs with descriptions of their finds.

'Even though visibility is usually poor, you sometimes get to see the most beautiful things,' said Ms Thuaiabah.

Ms Ng says she and fellow divers have spotted many rare creatures, such as sea-horses and sea snakes.

She has taken 200 people on dive tours.

Another enthusiast is amateur photographer and civil servant Ria Tan, 44.

Her snaps of clownfish (like the well-known cartoon character Nemo), shrimp anemones, sea horses, sea urchins and dozens of other creatures are found at www.wildsingapore.com.

She said: 'This is possibly the only place in the world where pristine rainforests, tropical mangroves and rich coral reefs all lie within 20 minutes of each other.'

'That,' she adds, 'is what is uniquely Singapore.'

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