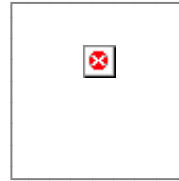




## The Singapore Scene

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# Nature Watch in S'pore part 1.



Written and presented by Felix Tan.

Welcome to 'The Singapore Scene', a programme, which focuses on issues that affect Singapore and lifestyles of Singaporeans.

This week, in the first part of a two part series that will appeal especially to nature enthusiasts, I will be exploring Singapore's nature trail.



The small island republic of Singapore has seen a considerable amount of urbanisation and population growth in the past few decades.

As a result, many natural habitats have been cleared for development.

These include large tracts of mature rainforest, mangrove swamps, and coral reefs.

The decline in expanse of these natural habitats has resulted in the corresponding decline, and in some instances, complete extinction of their associated wildlife.

However, a few years ago, the Singapore Zoological Gardens managed to reintroduce various species of animals that originally existed in many parts of Singapore to some nature enclave.

The reintroduction of these animals, such as the Lesser Mousedeer, took place in the few remaining natural habitats in Singapore, such as Bukit Timah nature reserve and MacRitchie Reservoir.

However, why were steps taken to reintroduce various animal species into Singapore's limited ecosystem?

Ho Hua Chew (HHC) is the chairman of the Conservation Committee of the [Nature Society, Singapore](#):

HHC: "Well, you see, the nature reserves is a degraded one. And it seems like some of the vegetation are not regenerating or multiplying as well as they are expected to be. For example, there is the problem of propagation of seeds and fruits and whatnots, you see. So, the biodiversity in terms of plant life, for example, has been greatly affected throughout the years, mainly because of fragmentation of the forests and so on. So, there is a need to bring in animals that have existed once in these forests and who are agents of seed propagation, plant propagation within the forests. So, in this sense, there is a need for this kind of reintroduction."

Would you say that Singapore has a very conducive or ideal environment, especially the nature reserves in Singapore, for such a reintroduction of animal species to take place?

HHC: "I have my doubts here that it will be ideal of our environment for the reintroduction because in the first place, the pressures of natural habitat is an ongoing one. And we do not really see that such pressures are considerably abated. There is a lot of development going on, even close to the nature reserves, or even within the nature reserves. Little developments that have been going on and we are not clear about the future of these reserves - they are under threat. Things like, for example, the 1992 projected golf course development in Lower Pierce, which almost cleared 120 hectares of forest, so, it is not clear whether such development will arise again in the future. Because if you want to reintroduce, you have got to make sure that there is the guarantee of protection for the habitat and that the habitat is also, again, suitable for the reintroduction of any species. Much studies have to be done before any proper reintroduction can be carried out. But give the pressures on natural habitat in Singapore, I would not say that it is ideal until we can be assured that in the future these environment, natural environment will be, that they will be guaranteed protection for these environments."

Recently, Tanjung Chek Jawa, a mangrove area situated on one of Singapore's southern islands, Pulau Ubin, garnered tremendous attention from nature lovers as well as the Singapore authorities.

So much so that the National Parks Board and the Ministry of National Development in Singapore have stopped all plans to reclaim that area until further notice.

Pulau Ubin remains one of Singapore's few areas of natural and cultural heritage.

Tanjung Chek Jawa, which is situated at the south-east coast of this island harbours a unique ecosystem no longer found elsewhere in Singapore



Photograph by Leong Kwok Peng

Chek Jawa, simply means "a woman from Java", while the place is known to the locals, simply as "Tanjung", which means, "by the sea or beach".

Leong Kwok Peng (LKP) is the chairman of the Marine Conservation Group of the Nature Society, Singapore.



Photograph by Leong Kwok Peng

I first asked him to elaborate on why Tanjung Chek Jawa in Pulau Ubin has attracted so much attention recently?

LKP: "I think essentially it is because Chek Jawa is a very unique ecosystem. Various kinds of marine habitat like rocky beach, mangrove forest, sand bars and sea grass, all roll into one. And we never had that in Singapore before, in that sense. And a lot of people who went there sort of discover it and find that it is really fascinating and I supposed through word of mouth, the message sort of spread around and people went there to see it for themselves and they really think that it is really wonderful. And I think it is also partly because it is a very easy, very accessible place and it is very children-friendly. Children could just walk up there and look at the marine fauna and flora, pick up the starfish and look at it. And for the older people, I suppose it brings back a sense of the past. I remembered those people back in those good old days when they wandered around Changi beach, or some other coastal areas, you know, they used to enjoy things like that when they were young. I supposed they would go out fishing, collecting shellfish and I suppose, it imposes that kind of very nostalgic feeling. So, all in all, I supposed it make people want to have such places in Singapore."

Along the coast of Chek Jawa lies an expanse of mud and sand flats with a mangrove forest on the landward side.

These sand and mud flats are home to a variety of fauna and flora, providing for a high biodiversity habitat.

This area has at least five species of seagrasses and according to the Singapore Red Data Book, all seagrasses are listed as "rare" or "Endangered".

Hence, extensive seagrass beds are an extremely rare sight in Singapore and in other areas.

Therefore, the sandflats at Chek Jawa are possibly the last of their kind anywhere in Singapore, which speaks volumes for their conservation value.



Photograph by Leong Kwok Peng

In the past few months, a few hundreds of people have been rushing down each weekend for their last chance to see Chek Jawa.

The National Parks Board thus has implemented a system to manage visits to Chek Jawa so that the frequent and large numbers of visitors would not put the area in any danger of being ruined.

So, what is the consequence of such a large group of people going to Chek Jawa? Kwok Peng:

LKP: "Maybe, I am also speaking from the point of view as a scuba diver. I dive quite a lot in the region and I do underwater photography. To see such things under water, you have to carry very cumbersome scuba equipment and things like that. Whereas in Chek Jawa, you do not need to be a diver to look at marine life, all you need is just to make sure that you go out in the low tide and everything is there - all laid out on your feet. From anemone, sponges, sea grass and all the works. The only problem is that if too many people go to Chek Jawa and they start trampling on, you know you are actually stepping on marine life wherever you are on the mudflat. So, I would suppose that if there is too many people, it may not be very good for the ecosystem in Chek Jawa. But the only positive part, maybe, is that the low tide window is very narrow, there is probably be like a couple of very low tide in the mud. So, I think the window is very limited. I suppose a study has to be made, what the carrying capacity if Chek Jawa, and definitely there have to be restrictions. We cannot have like up to a thousand people up there because it is not a very big place."

How important is it for us to protect and conserve Chek Jawa and also similar places in Singapore?

LKP: "Maybe we should just have a run through of the marine areas in Singapore. We sort of went through a couple of literature and we found that, you know, for example, mangrove, there is only like one percent of the original mangrove remains in Singapore. And you look at coral reefs, an estimated about 60 percent of our coral reefs, what you call, have been sort of lost to reclamation. And there is no fringes that exist on our mainland Singapore and only cluster of reefs remain in our southern islands. So, to a certain extent, I think Chek Jawa represents a dire situation of our marine areas. And yah, I think we should protect it as much as possible."

Leong Kwok Peng of the Nature Society, Singapore.

And till next week, I'm Felix Tan and you've been listening to the Singapore Scene on Radio Singapore International.

