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GOING BEYOND

A journey through the growth and change in nature and environmental conservation groups in Singapore from the eyes of an aspiring “environmentalist”.

GREEN

BY NOVEMBER TAN
Guest Writer

WHEN I WAS first exploring the world of environmental action in Singapore as a high school student in the late 1990s, there were few options available to me in terms of “green” groups to join. The community was not small but there were limited established groups who were very active and prominent in the 90s.

As a schoolgirl with big dreams of making a difference and contributing to nature conservation in Singapore, I joined the Nature Society (Singapore) (NSS). Through NSS, I was given an introduction to some of the nature places as well as the naturalist community in Singapore. While most activities are for members only and focus mainly on nature appreciation, NSS led the way in lobbying for nature areas under threat of development in Singapore. It was the one voice for nature conservation.

At the turn of the century, something happened that changed the “green” community in Singapore. In 2001, the events leading up to the deferment of reclamation at Chek Jawa also prompted attention on the changing nature of the naturalist community in Singapore.

There are now numerous and diverse voices speaking up in all corners for nature conservation on our little island state. A collective of individuals and informal groups are now brought to the public’s attention. These voices are dedicated to public education and

promoting environmental awareness in the general public.

In 2003, I finally visited Chek Jawa as a first year student in environmental biology at the National University of Singapore (NUS). My guide that afternoon was Ria Tan, the co-author of the Chek Jawa guidebook. She is also the person behind www.wildsingapore.com which started off as a companion website for the Chek Jawa guidebook but soon became a full-blown extensive web resource on all things “Nature” in Singapore.

With the experience of Chek Jawa behind her, Ria devoted the last 7 years into amplifying the voice for inter-tidal areas in Singapore. Together with a team of dedicated volunteers and other amazing individuals, groups like WildFilms, Team Seagrass and Naked Hermit Crabs were born.

Chronically an easily overlooked ecosystem globally, the inter-tidal habitats in Singapore now has multiple “blue” groups championing its cause! Generating awareness and public education for shores of Singapore are also Blue Water Volunteers, the Hantu Divers as well as the NParks Chek Jawa volunteers and Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR) Semakau Guides just to name a few!

Having always been a terrestrial person, my journey to the inter-tidal had been an interesting one

that brought me to work with many inspiring individuals along the way. As an undergraduate in NUS, I encountered a recruitment poster one day



Beacon at Chek Jawa. Chek Jawa constituted a pivotal point in local conservation movement.



Singaporeans are increasingly more vocal in conserving the island’s natural heritage.

which read "Do you have a passion for nature and the environment?"

Intrigued, I visited the website and submitted my application form. The rest is history. I became a member of Toddcats!, the volunteer arm of the Raffles Museum in NUS. The group is headed by N. Sivasothi, our volunteer coordinator, who was also one of the key individuals coordinating efforts at Chek Jawa in 2001. Toddcats has at its core, a bunch of passionate NUS undergraduates but also includes younger students and retirees!

In order to create wider awareness for Pulau Ubin especially after Chek Jawa, one of key programmes by the Toddcats is the ten-year old Pedal Ubin programme. As a Pedal Ubin guide, I rediscovered my maternal heritage from the island, and was encouraged to start a nature/heritage blog called Pulau Ubin Stories (<http://pulaubinstories.blogspot.com>) in 2004 under the Habitatnews banner. Habitatnews (<http://habitatnews.nus.edu.sg>) originated as a mailing list by Sivasothi in 1998 and in February 2004, published the first nature blog in Singapore. Sivasothi continues to be a strong advocate of content-specific blogging in the nature circles.

You must be wondering, "What do blogs have to do with conservation in Singapore?" Blogs provide a tool for easy creation of web content and a greater dissemination of information. A good example would be the Pulau Hantu Blog (<http://www.pulauhantu.org>) created by Debby Ng in 2004. What began as a simple personal blog has now grown to be the foremost voice for Pulau Hantu with a strong community of like-minded divers documenting the island!

Debby's blog was one of the first blogs that generated enthusiasm for coral reefs in Singapore through its vivid photos and videos. Diving in Singapore can be as exciting as any other neighboring countries! Thanks to the connectivity of the Internet and free web-based publishing technology, a wild dolphin sighting at St. John's Island can be put online instantaneously from your mobile phone, at the field site or an Internet café anywhere in the world.

Blogs have provided a voice for the youth of Singapore to speak up for the environment but it is not limited to the young. Experienced conservation veterans provide and share valuable content through their blogs. In fact, some of the best online nature resources in Singapore are blogs by veterans like past-NSS president,

Right: Wild Singapore, an environmental news portal established by Ria Tan, is a good source of information and updates about the local green scene.



Left: Blogs about the natural heritage of Singapore, such as the Pulau Ubin Stories, have enjoyed popular readership.

Dr Wee Yeow Chin, who runs the NSS Bird Ecology Study Group blog (<http://besgroup.talfrynature.com>). Filled with vivid photographs and insightful observations, the blog is an invaluable yet easily accessible resource for education and research. Current NSS president, Dr Geh Min also contributes on a blog! Together with Singapore Environment Council's Executive Director Howard Shaw, Dr Geh and her team are contributors on the Climate Change Organisation's blog (<http://blog.omy.sg/cco-blogger>).

While the structure of our naturalist community continues to evolve, some things never change. A successful community is only possible with a strong group of volunteers and supporters, working on the ground, guiding visitors, contributing content and working the logistics behind the scenes. Passion for the environment goes far beyond affiliations with any particular groups or organisations.

One such example is the Naked Hermit Crabs (NHC), so-named as a reminder of the disappearing shores in Singapore and subsequent loss in shells and homes for the hermit crabs. NHC is headed by Ron Yeo consisting of a group of non-denominational shore guides whom I can proudly say I am a part of. These are existing guides from Semakau, Chek Jawa or Southern Islands who have come together for the love of our shores and a hope to bring public to even more, different and diverse shores in danger.

The community in Singapore is still growing and evolving. The Jane Goodall Institute has just set up a branch in Singapore and WWF has also descended upon our soil. "Brown" issues continue to be at the heart of urban Singapore and groups like the Climate Change Organisation and the Environment Challenge Organisation reaches out to various stakeholder



Green veterans Toh Chay Hoon, Ron Yeo, Ria Tan and Dr Chua Ee Kiam at the launch of Ubin Volunteer Hub.



Volunteers picking up coastal debris at Coastal Cleanup 2007.

like the private sector and youths in creating a sustainable city. The animal rights and welfare front is also blazing new trails with Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES), headed by Louis Ng, leading the way with the new Wildlife Rescue Centre due to open soon!

Singaporeans are evolving too. Environmental awareness is higher than before and Singaporeans are not only appreciating but also expressing about nature. Ria Tan who tries to compile blog entries about Singapore's nature never lacks daily updates. This is proof of a growing pool of support in Singapore and the role of blogs in creating a voice for individuals like you and me.

Personally, WildSingapore's motto sums it up nicely. Explore. Express. Act. Get to know your nature areas, speak up for them and act on it. Opportunities are abound or simply create your own!



The author is currently a research scholar in the Department of Geography, NUS and author of the *Midnight Monkey Monitor* blog (<http://leafmonkey.blogspot.com>).

Environmental Groups in Singapore

This is not a comprehensive list. There are over 50 groups registered with SEC and many more informal naturalist groups that form the "green" community in Singapore.

General Nature Conservation Nature Society (Singapore)

<http://www.nss.org.sg>

SEC Green Volunteer Network

<http://www.gvn.com.sg>

Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR)

Volunteers, Toddycats!

<http://rmbur.nus.edu.sg/toddycats>

Eart-H (Joseph Lai)

<http://www.eart-h.com>

Simply Green (Dr Chua Ee Kiam)

<http://www.simplygreen.com.sg>

NParks CCNR Volunteers

<http://cnrv.blogspot.com>

NParks Ubin Volunteers

<http://uvp.blogspot.com>

NParks Sungei Buloh Volunteers

<http://www.sbwr.org.sg/friend-sofwetland/volunteers>

Zoo Docents

<http://www.szdocent.org>

Cicada Tree Eco-place

Marine Conservation

Pulau Hantu Blog

<http://www.pulauhantu.org>

Blue Water Volunteers

<http://www.bluewatervolunteers.org>

WildFilms

<http://wildfilms.blogspot.com>

Team Seagrass

<http://teamseagrass.blogspot.com>

Naked Hermit Crabs

<http://nakedhermitcrabs.blogspot.com>

RMBR Semakau Guides

<http://rmbur.nus.edu.sg/workshop/index.html#semakau>

Singapore Underwater Federation

<http://www.suf.org.sg>

Animal Rights

Animal Concerns Research & Education Society (ACRES)

<http://www.acres.org.sg>

Vegetarian Society (Singapore)

<http://www.vegetarian-society.org>

Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA)

<http://www.sPCA.org.sg>

Singapore House Rabbit Association

<http://www.hrss.net>

Cat Welfare Society

<http://www.catwelfare.org>

Urban Environmental Issues

Environmental Challenge Organisation

<http://www.eco-singapore.org>

Climate Change Organisation

<http://www.cco-asia.org>

World Toilet Organisation

<http://www.worldtoilet.org>

Singapore Environment Council

<http://www.sec.org.sg>

World Wildlife Fund (Singapore)

<http://tinyurl.com/38m42q>

Eco 4 the World Singapore

<http://www.eco4theworld.com>

Waterways Watch

<http://www.wws.org.sg>

Institutional Student Groups

NTU Earthlink

<http://clubs.ntu.edu.sg/earthlink>

NUSSU Students Against the Violation of the Earth (SAVE)

<http://www.nus.edu.sg/nussu/sc/save>

Ngee Ann Polytechnic Environmental Rangers

<http://www.nprangers.blogspot.com>

Ngee Ann Polytechnic Green Volunteers

http://soe.np.edu.sg/soe/be/be_green.html

Singapore Polytechnic Environment Club

<http://spenvclub.blogspot.com>

NEA Young Environmental Envoys

<http://tinyurl.com/38v7wg>

NIE Green Club

<http://niegreenclub.blogspot.com>

SMU Vértés



at the International



Three generations of biology graduates in local conservation: Leanora, Louis and Sivasothi at the ACRES Wildlife Rescue Centre. Louis is the founder and executive director of ACRES.



Wildfilms and Beachfleas volunteers at work on Sisters Islands.

Images are provided by the author unless otherwise stated.