Nature lover returns to his roots

Leo Tan hopes to work on marine biology in his post as NUS special projects director

PROFESSOR Leo Tan was part of a small elite team that helped set up the National Institute of Education (NIE), when it was commissioned in 1991 by then-education minister Tony Tan.

He spent 13 years as director of the institute before stepping down in 2006, when he took on an advisory role as professor of biological sciences at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

The former National Parks Board chairman, an avid nature lover, has been a key figure in championing the conservation of Singapore’s unique biodiversity. He helped ensure that Labrador Park – Singapore’s only rocky coast – was gazetted as a nature reserve.

Now, he leaves NIE for his “home” in the National University of Singapore (NUS), where he began his teaching career in 1973.

He will be the university’s new director of special projects, which will include setting up a joint master’s programme for science communications.

Prof Tan will also help to develop an integrated programme to foster the talents of promising science undergraduates who wish to pursue a multi-disciplinary PhD course.

He spoke to The Straits Times about his career and plans:

- How do you feel about leaving after 18 years?
  I will miss the people. But I am not too sad because I like to think I am working for Singapore Inc. It does not matter where I am, because ultimately we are all working together towards the same goal – a better Singapore.

- Why the decision to move now?
  NUS had made the offer previously, but I felt that I owed it to NIE to stay on and help. Now I think it’s time I did something for myself. I want to be able to experiment and maybe try some things I have always wanted to do. I want to go back to my roots – marine biology. I hope to spend more time researching, helping out on projects relating to our coastal areas.

- (Prof Tan will be lending his expertise to the newly launched Project Semakau – a three-year programme by the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research to document and record unique species of marine flora and fauna on Singapore’s artificial landfill, Pulau Semakau. The project is funded by HSBC Bank and supported by the National Environment Agency.)

- You have accomplished a lot in your 64 years. Don’t you think it is time to retire and enjoy life?
  I don’t think I will ever be able to retire completely. I cannot sit still. Plus I do not consider what I am doing as “work” – I love what I do.

- How can our education system be improved?
  We should not be closed in our minds. We cannot make people study subjects based on whether the topic will be able to help them earn money in the future.

- If a person wants to study astrophysics, we should not say tan bo jiock ( Hokkien slang phrase for being unable to earn a lot of money). We should recognise that this person could be a successful venture capitalist, or financial analyst, because astrophysics requires an understanding of some very complicated mathematical calculations. I studied marine biology, which was so cloistered that everyone thought my future was doomed. But it fostered in me a love for the environment, and everything turned out okay in the end.

- What do you consider your biggest accomplishment at NIE?
  I had hoped that we could make science something that even the layperson can enjoy. Bringing science to the masses has been a dream that has taken 25 years to bear fruit. Looking at the education system now, and the fact that science is taught in schools, and made fun through places like the Science Centre, it is a great feeling to see a dream realised.

- What other dreams do you have yet to fulfil?
  Bringing science to the masses was one. Another is that the universities will one day consider offering an undergraduate environmental science degree. I think it could help equip young people with the right tools to benefit the environment. It is also the culmination of multi-disciplinary learning – science, history, geography. We are too used to sticking to our disciplines, too used to our own fields. We should be schooled in different fields. No more working in silos.

The last dream I have is to one day set up a natural history museum, documenting all of Singapore’s plants and wildlife. We have a unique biodiversity that all Singaporeans should be able to share and experience.