Biodiversity and cities

This is an edited excerpt of a speech by Professor Tommy Koh at The Third Linnaeus Lecture in Nagoya, Japan, on Friday. The lecture series is named after Swedish father of modern taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus.

Singapore is fortunate to be located within the world’s richest biodiversity region. Although we have lost a significant percentage of our biodiversity, what remains is not insignificant. We have more than 2,000 species of plants, 360 species of birds, 270 species of butterflies, 120 species of reptiles, 75 species of mammals, 25 species of amphibians, 200 species of hard corals, covering 53 genera and 111 species of reef fish belonging to 30 families. One of our four nature reserves – the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, only 163ha in size – is home to more species of trees than the whole of North America.

Let me now share with you a few of the best practices which Singapore has undertaken to protect and enhance our biodiversity. First, the government’s lead agency on biodiversity, the National Parks Board (NParks) has been proactive in leading the way. Last year, it launched the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. Apart from championing a wide range of conservation projects, the plan also aims to give voice to biodiversity issues in policy and decision-making. NParks also has an admirable attitude of seeking to work closely with the civil society, the corporate sector, students and volunteers.

Second, I must praise the contributions of our universities, research institutions and scientists. At the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, at the National University of Singapore, visitors can learn about the region’s plants and animals, through an extremely comprehensive collection of preserved specimens. It is also training the next generation of the region’s scientists. They are also planning to build a new museum of natural history which will showcase the natural heritage of South-east Asia.

Individual scientists have been extremely active in their research, teaching and publications, on Singapore’s biodiversity. Next year, the National University of Singapore will launch a new multi-disciplinary bachelor’s degree in environmental studies.

Third, we have an active and responsible civil society. The Nature Society (Singapore), for example, is a blue-chip NGO. Its members conduct guided nature walks, bird and butterfly watching, talks as well as undertake conservation projects and surveys. Working closely with the Singapore Environment Council, the Nature Society (Singapore) works with schools and community organisations to promote the appreciation of nature and biodiversity.

Fourth, one of Singapore’s best practices is our ability to bring government, academia, civil society and the corporate sector to work together. The business community in Singapore is increasingly supportive of the environment and biodiversity. In one project, the Nature Society (Singapore), NParks and the private sector decided to do something which has never been done in the world. Singapore’s main shopping street, Orchard Road, is like the Champs-Élysées in Paris. In a 4km stretch linking the Singapore Botanic Gardens, on one end, and Fort Canning, on the other, we have trees and shrubs planted by volunteers along Orchard Road which are either host plants for butterflies or plants which provide them with nectar. When the plants flower and the butterflies arrive, the shoppers and pedestrians along Orchard Road will have the unique experience of being accompanied by butterflies.

Prof Koh is Singapore’s Ambassador-at-Large and patron of the Nature Society (Singapore).