$10m gift for natural history museum

Offer from unnamed donor boosts NUS bid to set up gallery for vast collection

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Singapore is one major step closer to having its own natural history museum, and it will be situated in the heart of the National University of Singapore's (NUS) new University Town in about three years.

A $10 million gift has just come in from an undisclosed donor giving a big boost to the fund-raising efforts spearheaded by NUS department of biological sciences.

The department is the custodian of about 500,000 specimens of mammals, birds, amphibians and other invertebrates, which belong to the oldest natural history collection of animals in Singapore.

The collection started from the days of the Raffles Museum founded by Sir Stamford Raffles, and boasts some century-old artefacts and extinct animals.

A sampling of the specimens is currently displayed at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR), a modest public gallery run by the department and housed within its premises on the NUS campus.

The unnamed donor, who apparently read a Sunday Times report in June last year about the need for Singapore's own natural history museum, called the department chairman to ask if the issue was ready to go, and Peck Ng, head of the RMBR and the Tropical Marine Science Institute at NUS, "He contacted us, asked us what we needed and asked for a game plan."

Despite their suspicions, Prof Ng and his team put together a concept plan within a month. A subsequent meeting put their minds at ease.

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"It was all very professional. He was interested and made all the necessary assurances that he was representing one or a few donors who would like to make a donation, but stay off the radar screen for the moment," said Prof Ng.

The conditions stipulated: The museum had to be accessible to maximise public education; the collection should be taken care of; and the exhibition space had to be bigger.

From an initial $1 million, the undisclosed donor later pledged $10 million.

"It's a strong motivation to raise the remaining sum. Now that we are talking to prospective sponors, it will be easier too," said Prof Ng.

The museum has received a groundswell of public support since media reports last year highlighted the vast, little-known collection.

That led to about 3,000 people showing up at the museum's gallery on International Museum Day in May.

In 2008, the museum had only 400 walk-in visitors the entire year. Since then, some smaller donations have also come in.

It is estimated that setting up the museum would cost about $55 million, but Prof Ng and his team are gunning for a minimum $35 million, which will fulfil a smaller scale museum and also solve the problems of the current museum, such as space crunch and safety issues.

Built from scratch, the new museum will be at least 7,000 sq m in size, with a minimum 2,000 sq m - or 10 times the current museum's size - devoted to exhibition space.

Less than 1 per cent of the museum's entire collection, one of the largest of South-east Asian animals in the region, is on display now at NUS. The team hopes it will be a focal point for biodiversity research and education, and that it will be accessible to other universities, national agencies and nature lovers.

"It will highlight our history, but also be a museum for South-east Asia," said Prof Ng.

Professor Leo Tan, director of the Singapore Science Centre from 1985 to 1996, added that another driving force of the new museum, hopes to restate the collection to its former glory.

Thrown out of the National Museum in 1970 when the Government decided to focus the exhibits on art and ethnography, the prized collection languished in poor condition for years without a permanent home.

It was only in 1998, after the botany and zoology departments at NUS merged to become the department of biological sciences, that the collection found a home in the RMBR.

"Our young people are born into a museum-built-up Singapore. They have no idea how much struggle went into making this metropolis. This museum will play a very important educational role for our young people to appreciate what they have if they know where they came from," said Prof Tan, now director of special projects at NUS science faculty.

Of the collection being accorded the long-overdue recognition it deserves, NUS president Tan Chorh Chuan said it was "better late than never."

"We feel we haven't tapped the full potential of the collection. It will be something of great interest to many young people," he said, adding that a purpose-built museum will add to the diversity and vibrancy on campus.

The new museum is expected to attract more than 80,000 visitors and researchers from Singapore and abroad annually.

Natural history museums in New York and London draw millions of visitors each year. The team hopes to raise the funds needed by the middle of the year, in tandem with the building plans of the new university drive.

"There's only one way ahead. Failure is not an option," said Prof Tan.

"The last piece of the puzzle is finding the right doner or donors."