

Hope for coral reefs here

Just one species gone; concerted effort can reverse extinction trends

By SHOBANA KESAVA

JUST one coral species out of more than 250 has disappeared from Singapore waters in over 100 years, despite the fast and furious pace of urban development here.

Quantity-wise, the figures are dire: About 60 per cent of local reefs has already been destroyed, and another 15 per cent is expected to be wiped out through current coastal development. However, the rich diversity present makes experts hopeful of reviving the reefs.

Professor Chou Loke Ming, a marine biologist with the National University of

Singapore (NUS) said a concerted effort made now by the Government, business sector and those in civil society can reverse current trends towards extinction.

Speaking last Saturday at the second International Year of the Reef (IYOR2008) event, the pioneer conservationist said that to make this happen, "development agencies must treat reef protection as a real exercise and not just for public relations, and draw up improvement plans at the same time as their development plans".

Before the latest study by NUS, scientists had thought at least 50 species had been lost to development work.

Prof Chou envisions a marine paradise by 2018, with many large young thriving reefs lining Singapore's shores. He noted that restoration efforts had begun over the last decade.

One example is on Pulau Semakau, where screens were set up to protect ex-

isting sun-loving coral reefs from being choked by sedimentation during the creation of a landfill there.

Another is the work by Keppel Industries, NParks and NUS teams to build a coral nursery near the Southern Islands using fibreglass as a base for coral fragments to grow.

"Today's restoration efforts are a start but they still have to go beyond saving small coral colonies here and there," Prof Chou said.

Environmental companies which can take on such work, he said, should also be given ample time to carry out assessments and save more corals standing in the way of land reclamation.

"Two weeks is not enough to tell them to get organised, and to take what coral they can before closing the whole place."

To reverse the damage done, Prof Chou suggested a mix of preserved natural, newly created and restored sites, sup-

ported by development agencies.

Already, better private-public sector partnerships are springing up, he said, with resorts in Bintan and One deg 15 Marina interested in saving corals.

Sentosa Development Corporation has even considered how to grow corals in its canals. He added: "We have a rich heritage; why squander it?"

Prof Chou's audience was made up largely of nature enthusiasts from non-governmental organisations as well as those from the Government and business community who support conservation issues.

About 500 visitors attended the weekend event at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. Chairman of IYOR2008 Francis Lee said a proposal from the people, private and public sectors to conserve Singapore's marine life will be submitted to the Government by the end of this year.

skesava@sph.com.sg

Help someone, get involved

Cyrene Reef Exhibition

Learn about the rich marine life found on a little-explored reef flat south-west of Singapore, only visible at low tides despite being in the middle of a busy shipping lane.

■ When: Weekdays, 9am to 5pm

■ Venue: Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at the National University of Singapore

■ Cost: Free
Call 6516-5082 or log on to <http://rmbr.nus.edu.sg/>

Party for a Purpose

Eight local bands have lined up a gig in aid of the Student Advisory Centre, which helps troubled youth. There will also be a carnival. Full proceeds from the entrance fee will go towards this charity.

■ When: Today, 3pm to 9pm

■ Venue: dbi O, 11 Unity Street

■ Cost: \$15 per entry

Call Natasha at 9144-7101 for tickets or go to <http://partywithapurpose2008.blogspot.com>

Bikers Charity Concert

Support welfare homes under the Muslim non-profit Jamiyah Singapore group by attending a concert organised by Bikers Aid International. Performers include Singapore artists such as Azyza and band Klutz, and Malaysian singers like Ella. Donations can be made at the concert.

■ When: Aug 23, 2pm

■ Venue: Hougang Stadium

■ Cost: Free

Call 6100-0160 or e-mail bikersaid.int@yahoo.com.sg

Heartstrings Walk @ Esplanade Park

Walk 2.5km and help the less fortunate. Proceeds from registration fees will go to Community Chest beneficiaries. At the carnival, visit more than 100 exhibits and stalls, spend time with the less fortunate, enjoy games, food and performances.

■ When: Aug 23

■ Time: 4:30pm (Walk); 10am to 9pm (carnival)

■ Venue: Esplanade Park

■ Cost: \$10 per participant

Call 6210-2605 or e-mail nccs_heartstringswalk@nccs.gov.sg

Ordinary Singaporeans lead the green charge

The hottest new cause here is the environment, and various activities to save Mother Earth have spread like wildfire online



ST PHOTO: SAMUEL H

She'll take you for a walk on the wild side

MS RIA Tan (left), 47, founded www.WildSingapore.com seven years ago, and spends over three hours a day updating it with news and pictures from Singapore's best green websites.

She even goes as far as to ferry volunteers to offshore locations to help them protect Singapore's shores.

"It still surprises Singaporeans to hear their country does have wildlife, as much as it does the international marine experts who are amazed at the variety here," she said during a recent 5am expedition to Cyrene Reef with Team SeaGrass.

That week's excursion was paid for by the National Parks Board, which supports the group.

The large reef, all 45ha (about 65 football fields) of which is exposed only at very low tides, sits between Pulau Bukom, Jurong Island and the mainland.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF HAZEL CONSUMI

'Otterman' spreads the eco-message

POSSIBLY the country's first green blogger, Mr N. Sivasanthi (above), 42, helped bring to public attention Pulau Ubin's Chek Jawa, which started the effort to save the wetlands from reclamation in 2001.

In the last decade, the ecology lecturer at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has trained hundreds of NUS students to be nature guides, as part of a commitment to share Singapore's natural heritage with its people.

To spread the message of eco-oriented goings-on here, the tech-savvy zoologist, who goes by the moniker Otterman, began sending out e-mail lists in 1998.

He set up webpages in 1999, and went on to upload digital shots in 2001 on his website, www.habitatnews.nus.edu.sg. Each step kept pace with the milestones of the Internet's evolution, he said.

His dedication proved useful to galvanising support for Ubin's Chek Jawa.

"One e-mail to NUS staff and another post on habitatnews and we saw several hundreds of people responding and turning up at Chek Jawa over two weekends."

Today, besides giving talks, conducting guided tours and leading the Toddy Cats in their annual coordination of the International Coastal Clean-up Singapore (ICCS), he encourages students to blog about their discoveries in green, blue and brown - flora, marine life and trash-collecting, calling the few who do "modern-day naturalists, putting out the news of tomorrow".

The latest way to get started, he suggested, is "mini-blogs" at postbox.nus.com, where each e-mail is turned into a posting.



ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

They watch over marine nurseries along the shores

TEAM SeaGrass - or TeamSG for short - is one of seven groups monitoring Singapore's shores.

It is led by Ms SHI Maryam Yaakub, 27, who is also a senior biodiversity officer with the National Parks Board.

They gather data on the meadows and

submit it to international group SeaGrass-Watch.

Ms Siti explained: "Seagrasses are nurseries, protecting and helping to feed young sea stars, fish and prawn species."

"They form the connectors between reefs and mangroves."



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE NAKED HERMIT CRABS

Learn about natural heritage from Crabs and Cats

THE Naked Hermit Crabs (NHC), Hantu bloggers and the Toddy Cats have the low-down on Singapore's natural heritage.

NHC (left, on a guided walk in Sentosa) and the Toddy Cats, affiliated to the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at the NUS, conduct public tours of areas threatened by urbanisation.

Toddy Cats (an affectionate name for the rare carnivorous forest dwellers, the palm civets) also coordinates the annual ICCS every September. It attracts about 3,000 volunteers each year.

The Hantu bloggers are avid divers. At Pulau Hantu, its 20 members explore and photograph the area, also playing underwater guides to 900 visitors every year.

They do so, its founder Ms Debby Ng, 26, said, "because we know the history of the area and the issues that surround it, and that it may not be here for long".

This is The Straits Times' page to highlight causes you are passionate about, and to show others how they can get involved. Tell us how you are making a difference at stlocal@sph.com.sg, with "causes" in the subject heading. Have you organised activities overseas? Send us a photo, we may publish it.