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It's not just us living here N Sivasothi, eco-warrior

Conserving our biodiversity for generations to come

by Tan Weizhen
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N Sivasothi struggled with a large piece of netting, wrenching it out of the thick mud, tossing aside dead branches tangled in it. He plodded through the muck, fishing out a couple more nets, sinking knee-deep in some parts.

Guess this is what an eco-hero looks like. No cape billowing in the wind, no cute red underwear on the outside - just a lot of mud. But someone's got to do it.

Those nets, explained the long-time environmentalist, were left there by anglers, who probably forgot to take them out. If left in the mud, it could trap swamp creatures and plants.

"People fishing here, I can't say there is anything wrong with it. But I disagree if they leave their nets and then harm the plants and life here," said the 45-year-old. He once found 300 horseshoe crabs - the population of which has been much depleted - entangled in such nets at the Mandai mangrove. He spent five hours saving each and every crab.

We were with Sivasothi as he fished discarded nets out of Pandan Mangrove, one of Singapore's last remaining mangrove swamps, off Jalan Buroh, near West Coast Road. It is a little piece of ecosystem that one would never expect to find, hidden behind a bus-stop and minutes from a big bustling road.

Swamps like this used to cover large areas of Singapore before urban development. "Now, you see, it is reduced to this short strip. It's so precious now," laments the lecturer who teaches at the Faculty of Science at National University of Singapore.

According to Sivasothi, there are only 15 patches of swamp left, which are at least 10 ha, but only two are considered large for Singapore - above 100ha - at Sungei Buloh Wetlands Reserve and Pulau Ubin.

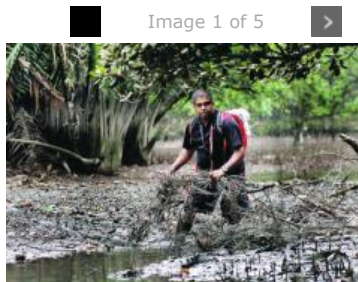
"Any action you do to conserve the environment is to ensure that Singaporeans now and in the future will have a chance to experience places like these," he said. "The same problem exists everywhere - ignorance of nature. It is very common in dense, urban cities. Some residents here don't even realise the diversity of flora at their doorsteps.

Action reaction

"Question is: Once people know, do they do anything about it?"

The answer might be encouraging. In 2001, Sivasothi experienced a breakthrough when he joined the effort to save Chek Jawa. The diverse, inter-tidal area on Pulau Ubin, vibrant with six kinds of ecosystems, was nearly up to be reclaimed for military purposes. Sivasothi started organising and conducting tours for people to see the wetlands one last time. At the eleventh hour, reclamation plans were called off after increased awareness and a louder call from Singaporeans for it to be saved.

Besides mangroves, the 45-year-old has a special interest in otters, the species having been his area of research as a Masters student. According to The Otterman, as Sivasothi calls himself on his blog, two species of otters call Singapore home, while four out of 13



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species of otter can be found in the region.

Habitat loss is one big concern, he pointed out, not just in Singapore but also around the world, as well as the problem of trash discarded in nature. Which is why this proactive man has had a clean-up operation - known as International Coastal Clean-up Singapore - going for the past 19 years, organised by his interest group Raffles ToddyCats.

Each year, volunteers gathered by more than 60 organisations go to shores all over Singapore, picking up more than 13 tonnes of rubbish left behind by humans. Data on such marine debris is sent to the United Nations. "Half a century of anti-littering campaigns, and we are not there yet," he griped.

Encouragingly, the volunteer numbers have grown. From an initial 1,500 volunteers, 4,000 have now joined the fray to clean up Singapore's backwaters.

Paying it forward

The seed of passion for the environment was first planted in the eco-warrior as a university undergraduate helping his professor map mangroves. That passion continued into his career when he joined the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research. Now he's passing that passion on to his students.

When we met him earlier in the morning for coffee, the dedicated lecturer was on the phone advising his students involved in animal welfare issues and wildlife research. Sivasothi, doting owner of three cats, also advises his students on organising conferences to discuss such issues.

Our little field trip ended with Sivasothi emerging happily muddled, the swamp free of fishing nets. He wiped himself down with practised motions.

Today on National Day, The Otterman will be celebrating the best way he knows how: With a mangrove clean-up in Lim Chu Kang. He has been doing so at various swamps for the past four years now, collecting about 800kg of trash each time, drafting helpful hands via his blog.

"Like most Singaporeans, I have seen what is happening around the world, so I'm grateful we have a secure life here. I feel that we should have a sense of pride," he said, animatedly. "On a day like this, I want to do something positive." TAN WEIZHEN

"My Singapore is a country which cares about nature, the environment, animals and each other." N Sivasothi

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