

## Today Online

5 June 2010

### Green shoots in Singapore

*By Venessa Lee*

He remembers it as a suspenseful time, marked by a feeling of dread. Unknown to him then, green activist Dr Ho Hua Chew was about to write a chapter of Singapore history.

In 1988, the Government accepted the proposal by the Nature Society (Singapore) (NSS) - then known as the Singapore branch of the Malayan Nature Society - to preserve Sungei Buloh as a bird sanctuary. It was Singapore's first allocation of land for a nature reserve since independence in 1965.

"When we submitted the Sungei Buloh proposal, there was a great deal of trepidation as to the consequences. We were left on tenterhooks as to the decision for a long while. The positive response came as a big surprise - and relief!" said Dr Ho, then chairman of the NSS' conservation committee.

Interactions between the Government and green NGOs have a comparatively long history, one marked by occasional tension and mutual respect. Conservation activists say this working relationship has evolved over the years into a closer partnership characterised by greater openness.

The NSS, for one, has been involved in several high-profile conservation efforts. In 1992, uncommon waterfowl were found to have settled in two ponds and surrounding wetlands at Marina South.

NSS requested the area be turned into a sanctuary, an appeal rejected by the authorities who cited the need to fill the ponds and marshes to rid them of mosquito infestation. The birds were resettled at SungeiBuloh.

That same year, the society influenced the Government's decision to shelve a proposal by the PUB to allow a golf course to be built in the Lower Peirce Reservoir area. Among other things, NSS had submitted an impact assessment report, Dr Ho recalled.

Over the decades, he noted, there has been more interaction between Government bodies and NGOs. "This wasn't the case in the '80s and even the '90s. (Regarding) the Lower Peirce struggle, things were very tense at the time."

These days, "I feel less tension in the air when dealing with the Government authorities on green issues. They appear to be more willing to listen and get your feedback," said Dr Ho, now a vice-chairman at NSS.

### **NGOS AT THE CONTROLS**

Representatives of NGOs such as NSS and the Singapore Environment Council (SEC) are among those now working with the National Parks Board (NParks) in developing a new Master Plan for

the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, "from concept to design to implementation", said Mr Wong Tuan Wah, NParks' director of conservation.

Close collaboration can sometimes result in the NGO taking full control of green projects, said Mr Howard Shaw, the SEC's executive director. "I think that initially, from the Government's standpoint, it was: 'We'll work on projects in collaboration and we'll partially fund you.' Over time, the Government is taking a step back, to say: 'You take ownership'," he said.

For instance, the SEC now administers the Singapore Green Label launched by what was then the Ministry of the Environment in 1992. "It was transferred to our care in 1999. I think it's a sign that the Government wants NGOs to take on a bigger role," said Mr Shaw.

This can translate to NGO involvement in high-level projects. "The level of engagement is huge these days. If you talk about the National Climate Change Committee, we were involved in that", as well as other national projects, said Mr Shaw.

### **THE CHEK JAWA CATALYST**

The number of green groups here has also mushroomed over time. "A lot of these are volunteer-based and very youth-orientated and youth-driven, and that's an encouraging sign," Mr Shaw noted, citing groups such as Eco Singapore.

These burgeoning numbers, conservationist N Sivasothi believes, are the result of the public outpouring of support that helped save Pulau Ubin's Chek Jawa from reclamation in 2001.

"The thing that has changed after Chek Jawa is that you have many more environmental groups. I think it was an awakening for many people," said Mr Sivasothi, who blogs on green issues as "Otterman", and was one of the first to raise awareness about Chek Jawa's biodiversity.

The increased conservation buzz, while encouraging, could bode future problems, said Dr Shawn Lum, current NSS president.

"During this period when many groups - NGOs, government agencies, schools and tertiary institutions - are involved in nature-related activities, there is a greater overlap in activities than ever before. This has amazing potential because collectively, NGOs working with each other and with government agencies can accomplish so much more than the sum of our individual efforts.

"However, if we don't communicate and if there is a lack of trust, we could find ourselves duplicating each others' work and worse, competing for projects and funding."

### **UNTAPPED GRASSROOTS?**

While interactions between the authorities and conservation groups have increased, another key vector has to be considered.

"In 2004, PUB decided we wanted to take a 3P approach towards water management" - where the Ps stand for the public, private and people sectors, said Mr Yap Kheng Guan, director of PUB's 3P network. "Everyone in Singapore plays a part."

But activists interviewed expressed concern that the wider public was not taking greater ownership of green issues that affect all. Said Mr Sivasothi, a lecturer at the National University

of Singapore's Department of Biological Sciences: "People may not realise how easy it is to craft an argument about an issue, or to write directly to a civil servant or even a minister."

Mr Louis Ng, director of the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres), thinks "we give too little credit to the Government when it comes to accepting feedback, making changes and forming partnerships with the civil society".

Member of Parliament Cynthia Phua, who is part of the Government Parliamentary Committee for National Development and the Environment, suggested a way for activists to get more ordinary Singaporeans involved.

NGOs, which tend to "work more broadly with the authorities or national agencies", should come down to the grassroots level and work with constituency groups like the Citizens' Consultative Committees), she said.

And more ordinary citizens would get involved, she believes, judging from the interest in her own constituency.

"Increasingly, people are excited about recycling. If they don't have recycling bins, they will ask me for them. And if recycling bins are misused, they will also tell me," she said.