

Today

29 May 2010

Oil spill hits Changi beach, Chek Jawa Animal and nature lovers voice concerns

By Joanne Chan

Even as the authorities finished cleaning up 90 per cent of the areas in East Coast Park affected by the oil spill which first hit Singapore on Wednesday - oil patches have begun appearing on Friday in Chek Jawa - a wetland on Pulau Ubin off Changi Point.

The mudflats on Pulau Ubin boast several different ecosystems, as well as plants and animals that are no longer common in Singapore.

The news from the National Environment Agency (NEA) - along with reports by animal protection group, Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres), that it had seen a lot of "dead animals, especially the inter-tidal species" at the oil spill site along East Coast Park yesterday - worry nature conservationists.

Acres executive director Louis Ng said: "Those are the animals that live on the shoreline. They really have nowhere else to run to".

The good news, however, is these inter-tidal species are more hardy than mammals and birds, Mr Ng added.

Acres said sea snails, sea crabs and hermit crabs were among 80 plus animals that volunteers from the group have cleaned free of oil patches before releasing back into the sea. On Friday afternoon, the oil patches on Chek Jawa were spotted along a 150-metre stretch of its coastal boardwalk. It was the fourth day after the collision between two ships off Changi led to 2500 tonnes of crude oil being spilled into the sea.

The National Parks Board (NParks) said it is critical to clean up the oil as soon as possible to prevent seepage into the mud, as that may affect the marine organisms in Chek Jawa. Contractors and officers have been sent there as well as to clear the affected sand and remove the oil.

Conservation International Singapore managing director Landy Eng told MediaCorp the NEA has accepted its offer of 30 to 40 standby volunteers. When notified, they will pitch in when the next slick occurs.

Acres is deciding if it should put in a formal request to the NEA, while Nature Society Singapore president Shawn Lum said it would be "happy to assist the authorities if asked".

Acres and Wild Singapore have also started to informally divide which areas to focus on.

NEA chief executive officer Andrew Tan told MediaCorp, "Thus far, the environmental impact has been minimal. We hope it'll stay that way."

He said NEA's first priority is to clean up the areas affected by oil patches for "public safety and public use" as these are very popular recreational areas.

It will conduct a study on the environmental impact of the oil spill once the cleanup is completed.

To date, NEA and the ship operator AET have mobilised over 245 workers to clean up the oil on the affected beaches and 14 NEA officers are continuing with surveillance at East Coast Park, Changi Beach and Pulau Ubin. As of Friday, 19.6 tonnes of sand contaminated with oil have collected from the beaches at East Coast Park and disposed off at the Semakau Offshore Landfill.