

## **The New Paper**

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### **Oil-hit sea animals rescued**

*By Amanda Yong*

#### **Volunteers start operation before dawn when tide is low.**

These tiny creatures populate the sandy shores of our little island.

Hiding rocky crevices, underneath sand and shells, they were probably the biggest victims of the recent oil slick that hit Singapore's coastline.

The marine creatures were covered in oil by the time they were found by volunteers from the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres).

And it was too late for some of the crabs, starfish, clams and sea snails.

Acres executive director Louis Ng told The New Paper on Sunday yesterday: "Some of the animals ingested a lot of oil and did not survive."

But some did, and were released back into the sea at Sembawang Beach and Sentosa around 11am yesterday after Acres volunteers cleaned them up using fresh sea water bought from aquatic shops.

The group from Acres began their rescue operation even before the crack of dawn, Mr Ng said.

Three full-time staff members and two volunteers were at Changi Beach at 3am. They were joined by 20 volunteers about three hours later.

Wearing rubber boots that would provide a firmer grip when walking on the slippery oil-covered rocks, they poked at crevices and scoured Changi Beach for marine creatures affected by the oil slick.

They began work at that early hour as that was when the tide was at its lowest.

"That's when the species that are trapped there have nowhere to run," Mr Ng said.

In eight hours, they found 145 animals including clams, sea cucumbers, hermit crabs and starfish.

On Thursday and Friday, 40 Acres volunteers worked their way through the beaches at East Coast Park where they found 84 oil-covered creatures such as crabs, jellyfish and peanut worms.

Mr Ng could not say how much survived in the three-day search-and-rescue operation.

But the impact of the oil spill, which resulted from a collision between a tanker and a bulk carrier early on Tuesday morning, has not been completely negative.

Mr Ng, at least, sees the silver lining in the oil-stained cloud.

He said: "Our hotline has been ringing non-stop with calls from members of the public asking about how (our local flora and fauna) have been affected by the oil slick."

Some have also asked how they can help in rescue efforts.

"It's not about individuals coming forward, they bring their families along too, and it's very nice to see that happening," he said.

Yesterday, a family of 10 turned up with a kettle of soya milk and packets of nasi lemak for the volunteers.

They were curious about the rescue efforts and eager to contribute, Mr Ng said.

"When you go to Changi Beach, nobody knows about the wildlife there. But this incident, even though it's bad news, has made the community aware (about the wildlife there)," he said.

"Hopefully, this will inspire more people to be interested in protecting our marine life."

The oil spill first hit a 700m stretch of Changi Beach on Friday. Yesterday, the slick spread from carparks 6 and 7 to the area between carpark 1 and carpark 4.

Workers were deployed immediately to clean up the oil stains, a National Environment Agency (NEA) spokesman said in a press release yesterday. Most of the oil has been removed, with only 30 per cent of park 7 still affected.

Since then, the affected parts of Changi Beach have been closed and signs have been put up to warn the public not to go into the water.

The same goes for the beaches at East Coast Park, which remain closed. The public is advised to refrain from swimming and engaging in water activities in these areas.

Also hit on Friday was Chek Jawa, a protected area on Pulau Ubin.

Oil absorbent booms and paddings were put up in the affected areas in the wetland area, and most of the oil patches that seeped through have largely been cleaned up in a joint effort by NEA, the National Parks Board (NParks) and volunteers.

More than 100 volunteers and workers helped in the clean-up at Chek Jawa in the past two days, said Mr Wong Tuan Wah, director, conservation at NParks.

No immediate signs of major damage to the Chek Jawa eco-system were noted but NParks is monitoring the situation closely. Although Chek Jawa is still open to visitors, guided walks will be suspended for the next two weeks. Any remaining oil patches may still be brought in to the beaches at East Coast Park, CHangi Beach and Pulau Ubin, the NEA spokesman said.

This would depend on the prevailing winds and the sea current situation over the next few days.