

Tracing 400 years of change in environment of Singapore

Exhibition challenges visitors to reclaim their natural heritage

Clement Yong

Amid Singaporeans' renewed interest in nature comes an exhibition that documents the change in the environment on the island over the past 400 years.

Through more than 150 books, maps, illustrations and specimens, the exhibition – Humans x Nature: Environmental Histories Of Singapore – at the National Library describes the devastation of the environment as a result of colonialism and capitalism, as well as its later partial rehabilitation.

It challenges visitors to reclaim their natural heritage.

Co-curator Georgina Wong said she was intrigued by the Wild West mentality in nature studies of the distant past. "The way that nature was studied back then was almost like it was a new frontier, where there were no laws, no rules. This was quite clear from reading early

European accounts of hunting or trapping expeditions. Anything could happen then because nature and humans were so closely intertwined," she said.

"Today, most of us grew up in the city, so most of the nature we experience is in reserves or parks and gardens... But all the locations of our nature reserves are based on things that happened in the past. It's good to have that historical context."

The carefully curated items at the exhibition offer rich stories.

One of the first panels is on a young tapir that was kept by William Farquhar, the first British Resident of Singapore, as a pet for six months. He used it as part of his studies on a new species of tapir in Melaka, feeding it "indiscriminately on all kinds of vegetables".

"As tame and familiar as any of the dogs about the house," he wrote. "(the tapir was) very fond of attending at the table to receive bread, cakes, or the like."

Those visiting the exhibition can also get to learn about Mr Henry Corner, a former assistant director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, and his two monkeys. Called Puteh (White) and Merah

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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MS GEORGINA WONG, co-curator of the exhibition.

(Red), the animals were trained to collect specimens in return for lemonade. Merah died after being sent up a poisonous tree, while Puteh bit Mr Corner on his arm, leaving him with a recurring infection that lasted years.

Ms Wong said that much of the source material for colonial times at the exhibition is from Western sources, but the curators made an effort to show that local systems of knowledge existed.

For instance, the centrepiece of a panel on indigenous knowledge is a 1930 list of Malay village medicine compiled by a European botanist and a Malay naturalist.

Despite framing village medicine as superstitious and backward, it set the Malay names of plants and their Latin scientific classifications side by side, lending them some equivalency.

In the post-colonial context, said Ms Wong, this could remind visitors that how we refer to things around us matters, with the colonial legacy impacting even the nomenclature of plants and marine life.

A short video on Orang Laut culture, produced by the community, is also included in the exhibition.

Mr Firdaus Sani, 33, whose family are some of the last Orang Laut residents of Pulau Semakau, said the knowledge of his people is unique. "Our knowledge of the sea, like how to de-poison pufferfish or capture mud crabs, is quite special. We feel the spirit of the sea lives on with us. It is an appreciation for food and nature that cannot be found elsewhere," he said. "By having our voices heard, we feel we have a claim on Singapore."

The exhibition tells a story spanning four centuries, from the intensive cultivation of land precipitated by the Europeans – which in turn destroyed much of Singapore's primary forests – to the ongoing efforts by locals to conserve the natural habitat today.

In between, the exhibition meanders through eyewitness accounts of coolies whose co-workers were attacked by tigers, and showcases special commemorative stamps issued as part of Tree Planting Day, which began in 1971 under the "garden city" campaign.

Associate Professor Farish Noor, who specialises in history at Nanyang Technological University and was consulted for the exhibition, said: "While not necessarily malevolent, the Europeans, in expanding their frontiers of knowledge, colonised everything they touched."

"They (at the time) created the South-east Asia that we now know, and today we have come to this point of climate crisis. We need a more humane modernity, one that sees ourselves not just as protectors of nature but as part of the natural world."

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What to look out for at the exhibition

Human x Nature: Environmental Histories Of Singapore puts together gems from Singapore's collection to offer a narrative ranging from the scientific expeditions of Europeans to ongoing efforts by locals to preserve the island's natural habitat. The stories and lessons from the texts and sketches spanning four centuries can now be rediscovered at the National Library until Sept 26.

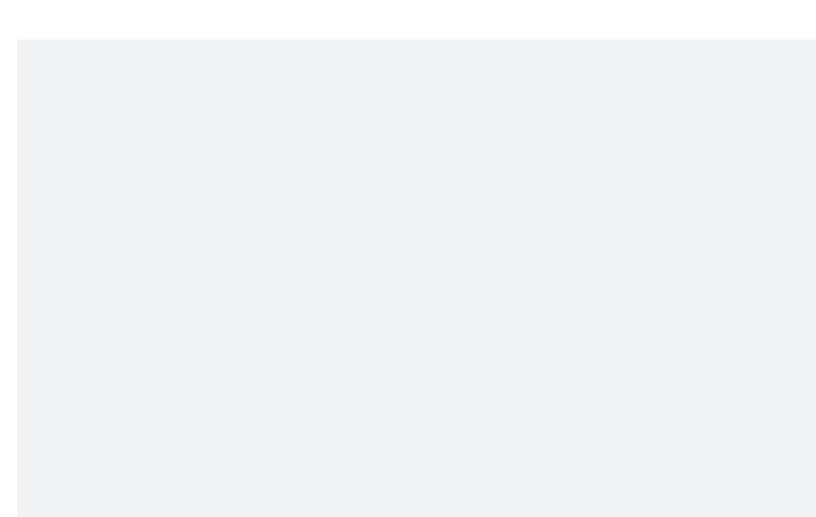


1 Ichthyological Atlas Of The Dutch East Indies,

by Pieter Bleeker
The colourful drawings of tropical fish in this tome are sure to catch your eye. Containing over 1,500 drawings of fish from the waters of the Malay Archipelago, the nine-volume series was published by the colonial government of the Netherlands in the 1860s and 1870s. It is still one of the largest compilations of fish in the region and is now in the collection of the National Library.

2 Malay Village Medicine,

by I.H. Burkill and Mohamed Haniff
A rare work from the colonial era that credits a Malay naturalist as an author. Published in 1930, it provides information on how medicinal plants were used by bomohs (local medical practitioners) and bidans (midwives) to treat common ailments. The Malay names of the plants were set alongside their Latin scientific names in the publication, lending them some equivalency, even though such treatment methods were seen as superstitious and backward by Europeans.



4 The Story Of The Rubber Industry In Malaya,

by Sir Henry Nicholas Ridley
Sir Henry Nicholas Ridley, the first director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, pioneered a new way of tapping rubber that shifted the global rubber trade from its centre in Brazil to South-east Asia. His method protected the rubber tree from damage and let it produce latex for more than 20 years. By persuading locals to plant rubber commercially in the early 20th century, he was instrumental in Malaya accounting for more than 50 per cent of the global rubber trade within a short time.

3 Specimen of juvenile tapir

from Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum
William Farquhar, the first British Resident of Singapore, kept a young tapir in his home in Melaka to study it, feeding it with bread and cakes. He was seeking to be among the first to provide an account of a new species of tapir in the region in the 1820s. The animal died after six months, but not before Farquhar noted the change of colour in the juvenile tapir's coat between four and seven months. On show at the exhibition are the specimen of a juvenile tapir as well as a book co-authored by Farquhar.



5 Vintage poster

by the former Parks and Recreation Department of Singapore
The "Know Your Roadside Trees" poster from 1979 alerted locals to \$4,000 in cash vouchers to be won if they brushed up on their knowledge of local flora. It was a period of reforestation and of official encouragement to get people to plant trees, as part of Singapore's then efforts to create a garden city. These went some way to reversing the adverse environmental impact of colonialism, which had destroyed most of Singapore's primary forests for commercial agriculture.

TEXT: CLEMENT YONG PHOTOS: NLB STRAITS TIMES

NParks officer charged with graft, taking upskirt photos

David Sun

An officer with the National Parks Board (NParks) was charged yesterday with corruption and cheating, and has also been accused of

taking upskirt photos of multiple women. Lee Choon Phing faces nine charges of insulting the modesty of a woman, and one charge of cheating and corruption. The 48-year-old was a manager only provided 5,000.

branch of NParks, an initiative to promote gardening culture. Lee is alleged to have corruptly attempted to obtain \$10,000 from a vendor that was supposed to provide 10,000 hats to NParks but only provided 5,000. This allegedly took place in February



Lee Choon Phing is out on \$20,000 bail and is expected to be back in court on May 25.

photos of multiple women between 2015 and 2019.

The victims included those working at a nursery that supplies plants used in parks, and women on trains and near a school.

In a statement about the case, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) said Singapore adopts a zero-tolerance approach towards graft and other crimes. Lee, who is out on \$20,000 bail, is expected to be back in court on May 25.

If convicted of corruption, he may be jailed for up to seven years, or fined up to \$100,000, or both.

If convicted of cheating, he may be jailed for up to 10 years or fined.

If convicted of taking upskirt photos, he may be jailed for up to one year, or fined, or both, on each charge.

Those wishing to report a graft case can call CPIB on 180 376-0000, go to www.cpi.gov.sg, e-complaint, or send an e-mail to report@cpi.gov.sg. They can also visit or write to CPIB headquarters at 2 Lengkuu Bahru.

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