

Singapore Management University

## Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

---

Social Space

Lien Centre for Social Innovation

---

2008

### Growing Green Space

Geh Min

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien\\_research](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien_research)



Part of the [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Public Policy Commons](#), and the [Social Policy Commons](#)

---

#### Citation

Min, Geh. Growing Green Space. (2008). *Social Space*. 84-89.

Available at: [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien\\_research/13](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien_research/13)

This Magazine Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Lien Centre for Social Innovation at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Space by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email [cherylds@smu.edu.sg](mailto:cherylds@smu.edu.sg).

# GROWING GREEN SPACE



*Carpetanemone*

Environmental groups: Saviours of the world or nutty nuisances? Dr Geh Min traces the evolution of the green movement in Singapore in the context of changing political, social and environmental values.

Photos, except page 87, Courtesy of Leong Kwok Ping

Environmental groups have always been difficult to fit into a conventional mould. Do they contribute to the greater good of society or do they only serve their own narrow interests? Are they hobbyists or lobbyists; responsible civic-minded pillars of society or agitators and agents of civil unrest? Is protecting the environment a worthy cause deserving public and philanthropic support? These questions have long puzzled not just the public but even environmentalists themselves.

These days, rapidly evolving changes in the environment, in the social-political climate and within environmental groups, make the answers to these questions very different from what they would have been a quarter of a century ago. Hopefully, this short history of the environmental movement in Singapore will give some insights, if not the answers, to these questions.

### The Early Years

After gaining independence in 1965, Singapore embarked almost immediately on an ambitious and aggressive clean and green programme. However, this was driven solely by the government. For the ordinary Singaporean, environmental problems either did not exist or the various agencies were tackling them so well that they felt there was no need to act. As James Allen noted, "Singapore can claim no environmental movement in the sense of a broad coalition of urban or rural citizen action groups fighting against pollution, environmental degradation or the inequitable allocation of natural resources."<sup>1</sup>

One notable exception was the Nature Society (Singapore) which started in November 1954 as a branch of the Malayan Nature Society. It is now recognised as the first true environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Singapore. And while the international green movement had its roots in an era notable for the destruction of natural habitats and growing environmental pollution, the Nature Society's origin was rather different. Started as a recreation and research group by academics and nature lovers, "they found themselves thrust into the role of environmental activists, advocating the protection of the country's nature areas. Their transformation from hobby group to lobby group was emblematic of a broader evolution in Singapore politics".<sup>2</sup>

It would be more accurate however to describe the Nature Society from the 1980s onwards as both a hobby and lobby group. While it continued its nature walks, talks and field trips, data collection, research and publications, it also grew an advocacy arm in response to the loss and degradation of

---

The beauty of the Chek Jawa legend was that so many people from so many different walks of life felt that 'they had made a difference' — some perhaps for the first time.

---

nature areas in Singapore. Obviously, the two roles were complementary and although only a small sector of the membership participated actively in advocacy, this was strongly supported by the general membership who grew to over 2,000 by the 1990s.

While many of the Nature Society's 'hobby' activities such as seminars, talks, clean-up campaigns and reef rescue operations involved the wider public, much of its advocacy work was done quietly. Mekani and Stengel noted that the society's style is "a non-confrontational one. A lot of lobbying is done behind closed doors and when publicity is sought, it is ensured that the Government is informed ahead of time. Reports, such as the Master Plan and the Environmental Impact Assessment, are addressed to the Government and submitted for their consideration before they are made public. The [Society] does not hold back its view but realises when confrontation does not lead anywhere."<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Cherian George quotes a committee member from the society: "We are a lobby group, but we are not a pressure group."<sup>2</sup>

Despite cultivating a non-confrontational and constructive approach to nature conservation where possible, the Nature Society was always prepared to speak out in public when necessary and this earned it a reputation for civil activism in a political landscape that was generally considered rather tame.



*Chek Jawa Boardwalk*

Another body of note is the Singapore Environmental Council which was set up in 1990 on the initiative of the government to “educate, inspire and assist individuals, business organisations and environmental groups to care for and protect the environment”.<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, the council was viewed by the environmental community and public as a government-initiated NGO which was created to promote clean and green campaigns. But despite its rather contrived origin and assisted delivery, it fulfilled a much needed role in educating Singaporeans on ‘brown’<sup>5</sup> issues such as waste reduction, recycling and more environmentally-friendly lifestyles. Through able and imaginative leadership, the council has established itself as a credible NGO and attracts an active cohort of volunteers to its Green Volunteers Network. It is now Singapore’s leading environmental NGO on ‘brown’ issues with especially strong links to youth, businesses and industries.

Despite their contrasting origins and agendas, the Nature Society and Singapore Environmental Council – the two main environmental NGOs in Singapore – developed a synergy that considerably enhanced Singapore’s green movement. The former came to recognise the importance of ‘brown’ issues in furthering the cause of biodiversity and ecosystem conservation, while the latter realised that one of the most potent drivers of good environmental practices was an intrinsic love of nature.

#### **The Fruits Of The Labour**

Both groups recognised the importance of education and public outreach and developed

these to the best of their differing capacities and strengths. Their efforts were aided by an increasingly educated and cosmopolitan public which had a growing and more sophisticated awareness of global environmental concerns.

In fact, an independent survey of environmental attitudes amongst Singaporeans sponsored by the Singapore Environmental Council in 2001<sup>6</sup> showed an encouraging level of environmental awareness, especially amongst younger Singaporeans. Over 85 percent of all respondents felt that conserving nature reserves and parks is important regardless of visitor numbers. When asked if Singapore should allocate more or less land in future for nature reserves, 52 percent wanted the current number maintained, 40 percent wanted an increase, and only three percent felt that less land should be allocated for nature in the future.

The survey also showed encouraging levels of awareness on global issues. Eighty-four percent felt that in protecting the environment, Singaporeans should think beyond Singapore and include the region. Nearly 90 percent felt that global warming is a long-term danger to humanity and 61 percent felt that dealing with global warming is everyone’s responsibility. (As this survey was conducted before the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report in 2007 and the subsequent extensive media coverage, one would expect significantly higher figures in 2008.)

But despite the survey results and attempts by the government, NGOs and the media to increase environmental awareness amongst Singaporeans, there was, until recently, a disappointing vacuum when it came to translating this awareness into action. Recycling of waste was at an abysmally low level despite several abortive attempts by both the government and NGOs to improve the situation. There seemed to be a general feeling that ‘we should leave it to the government’.

Clearly, when it came to environmental protection, something was required to galvanise the community into action. However, when this finally happened, it came from a totally unexpected source.

#### **Chek Jawa**

Tanjong Chek Jawa is a unique 100 hectare swathe of wetlands on the south-eastern tip of Pulau Ubin, an island off Singapore. The story of Tanjong Chek Jawa – with its rich and colourful patchwork of intertidal ecosystems and the circumstances that led to an unexpected reversal of land reclamation plans on the island – has been told again and again and is now the stuff of legends.

The government had planned to carry out reclamation works in the area. However, the extraordinary images of the myriad flora and fauna found on the island became a potent lightning rod for the diverse perspectives of everyone from politicians, citizens and veteran environmentalists to newly-converted enthusiasts, academics and media. Each had his own version of the story to tell, and all have become an integral part of the legend.

It was the most memorable and visible demonstration of people-power, Singapore-style; not with banners, petitions and protest marches, but with the quiet presence of thousands of concerned citizens. Assisted by the internet, the message and images spread like wildfire and many found their way to policy-makers. There was no battle, no confrontation, and yet the final decision by the government in December 2001 to accede to these requests to halt land reclamation works was an important milestone in Singapore's environmental activism.

Indeed, in his national day speech five years later, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong paid tribute to the campaigners: "They got organised and they persuaded Mah Bow Tan [the then Minister for National Development] to save Tanjong Chek Jawa and persuaded the Cabinet too... So, these are the ingredients of 'heartware'. They are individual pieces, they are not all organised top-down plans but they show people who care, they show people who are doing things."<sup>7</sup>

#### After Chek Jawa

For both the government and Singaporeans, Chek Jawa was, and remains, a milestone for raising social consciousness.

It could also be regarded as a homecoming for veteran environmentalists and nature conservationists. Decades of persistent advocacy and patient work 'in the wilderness' were finally given due recognition as an endeavour that benefited the community and nation. The 'agitators' were no longer just a narrow interest group. I would go so far as to say that, without the groundwork laid by these individuals and their organisations over the years, Chek Jawa might never have happened.

But the Chek Jawa phenomenon was not a random lightning strike. Rather, it was a catalyst for a reinvigorated and sustained civil activism. The number of second and third generation green and 'blue groups'<sup>8</sup> that formed during and after Chek Jawa took even the Singapore Environmental Council and the Nature Society by surprise.

The depth of passion and diversity of today's generation of environmental volunteers can be gauged by the number of websites and blogs, the profusion of school and corporate green clubs, and the encouragement given by government agencies to supplement their work by tapping into the energy and enthusiasm of green volunteers.

That said, the success in attracting and retaining committed volunteers, especially after Chek Jawa, contrasts sharply with the sector's lack of ability to attract substantial funds. In 2003, S\$512 million was donated to Institutions of Public Character<sup>9</sup>, but environmental NGOs received only S\$325,000 of it. Howard Shaw, Executive Director of the Singapore Environmental Council described the amount as 'a sliver of the pie' but at about 0.6 percent or 60 cents per S\$100, it is closer to a few crumbs. Since the lion's share of this 0.6 percent goes to the council, the rest are really left with a miniscule share.

What are the reasons for this disconnect between green causes and philanthropy?

Some reasons are historical. As Singapore's oldest and most established environmental NGO, the Nature Society started as a hobby group so its activities were naturally almost totally funded by its membership. When it evolved its advocacy arm, many of the issues were over land use. As this was considered politically sensitive, the data collection, surveys and research, proposals, master plans and environmental impact assessments were done gratis by members with the relevant expertise. To this day, this practice remains as

*Marine Life*





*Flower Crab*

countless proposals backed by painstaking data collection and ground work are submitted to government agencies by members of the society's conservation committee and their helpers, of whom all are volunteers.

Another reason for the lack of support from donors and philanthropic organisations is the fact that environmental NGOs just do not appear on their radar screen. As Willie Cheng points out, "Legally...[the definition of] charity covers four areas: relief of poverty, advancement of education, advancement of religion, and 'other purposes beneficial to the community'."<sup>10</sup> Environment is one of the overlooked 'others'.

A typical example of this continual oversight was the public consultation on a draft code of governance organised by the Charity Council and Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.<sup>11</sup> Participants (both are Institutions of Public Character and charities) were asked to tick off their respective sectors and the boxes provided were Health, Social Service, Education, Arts & Heritage, Sports, Community, Youth and Religion. A category for environmental groups was conspicuously absent.

This lack of recognition has compelled many environmental NGOs to solicit funds by wearing an educational or community welfare hat

which, of course, compounds the problem of invisibility.

Howard Shaw, describes environmental care as a 'neglected cause', adding that "the general mindset is that the environment is the responsibility of the government, so as a whole it has a much smaller mindshare of the giving philosophy".<sup>12</sup> However, the government does not necessarily share this view that environment is wholly the responsibility of the government. Even government agencies such as NParks have begun soliciting for public donations, so the squeeze on environmental NGOs has become even more acute.

Meanwhile, many environmental NGO volunteers do not just give generously of their time and expertise; they also give their money. Unfortunately, many, if not most, lack sophisticated fundraising skills; and without the wherewithal to develop such skills, they are caught in a vicious cycle of chronic underfunding.

Fortunately, not all donors overlook the environmental cause and one of the most generous and consistent corporate sponsors to the environment has been HSBC which launched a Care-For-Nature Programme way back in 1989 with the aim "to generate community awareness for action for environmental conservation". They have continued this laudable start with "hundreds

## The beauty of the Chek Jawa legend was that so many people from so many different walks of life felt that ‘they had made a difference’ - some perhaps for the first time.

of outreach initiatives to promote a broader and deeper understanding of environmental issues and the importance for the community as a whole to help protect it”.<sup>13</sup>

Another corporate sponsor that has made environmental causes one of its priorities is property developer CDL. Over the years, it has made significant contributions to both green and brown issues, working closely with their recipients to ensure that their donations are effectively targeted and utilised.

Other corporations, particularly multinational corporations, are now following the steps of HSBC and property developers like CDL. They donate to the environmental cause though, understandably, high visibility and prestige are part of their agenda; so, small, struggling environmental NGOs are not their preferred choice.

### What's Next?

Environmental groups like the Nature Society and Singapore Environment Council have struggled to form, evolve and survive in a sea of apathy, indifference and even occasional hostility. Their continued existence is testimony to the stalwart individuals who believe strongly in the importance of environmental stewardship and to the overall welfare of the planet.

But what of the future? Environmental challenges are becoming more prevalent, pressing, global and apparently insoluble. Singapore's younger generation, with better education and exposure through IT and the media, are more aware of environmental problems; but they are also cushioned from direct contact or experience by greater affluence, urbanisation, the ability to escape into a virtual world and an efficient government which has done the lion's share of cleaning up and greening the environment.

Politicians express growing concern that littering and other indications of environmental apathy appear to be increasing in the younger generation. At the same time, however, many dynamic and diverse environmental groups have sprung up in the last few years and almost all have been started by younger Singaporeans.

At the end of the day, protecting our environment must be the responsibility of not just NGOs, government, corporations or committed individuals. It is a task whose burden falls on everyone. Mother Nature has been donating her services and resources for far too long without recognition or return; and even She, the ultimate philanthropist, seems to be on the brink of collapse. Green groups can help make the connection and close the loop, but they cannot save the environment on their own. Growing green space must be a communal asset. □

<sup>1</sup> James Allen, *Business International Report on the Environment in Asia and the Pacific*, 1992, pp. 265

<sup>2</sup> Cherian George, *Singapore “The Nature of Politics and the Politics of Nature”* in *The Air Conditioned Nation* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 2000), pp. 142

<sup>3</sup> Mekani and Stengel, “The Role of NGOs and Near NGOs” in *Environment and the City* edited by Ooi Giok Ling (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies, 1995), pp. 290-291.

<sup>4</sup> Singapore Environment Council <[www.sec.org.sg](http://www.sec.org.sg)>

<sup>5</sup> Green issues address natural or ecological matters. Brown issues focus more on cities and urban concerns such as waste in our streets, polluted air, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Singapore Environment Council, “Independent Survey of Environmental Attitudes amongst Singaporeans 2001”

<sup>7</sup> “Transcript of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's National Day Rally English Speech on 20 August 2006 at NUS University Cultural Centre” on SINGOV online <<http://www.gov.sg/NDR06Engspeechtranscript.pdf>>. The last part of his speech also refers to other examples such as the Waterways Watch Society in Singapore and an SMU graduate who devoted his time to alumni matters.

<sup>8</sup> Environmental conservation groups protecting marine biodiversity and ecosystems.

<sup>9</sup> Institutions of Public Character are organisations or funds that can issue tax exempt receipts.

<sup>10</sup> Willie Cheng, “In aid of the poorer or richer”, *The Straits Times*, 4 September 2007, pp. 20

<sup>11</sup> *Public Consultation on Draft Code of Governance Feedback*. Form pp. 2

<sup>12</sup> Howard Shaw, “Natural Concern”, *SALT* No. 6, Nov-Dec 2004, pp. 22

<sup>13</sup> Goh Kong Aik, “Banking on Green Change”, *Elements* Issue 3, 2007, pp. 6



Besides being former president of the Nature Society, **Dr Geh Min** is a board member of The Nature Conservancy's Asia Pacific Council, the Singapore Environment Council, and the Water Network of Public Utilities Board. In February 2007, she led the Singapore delegation at the “Citoyens de la Terre” conference on climate change.