

New blueprint to conserve S'pore's marine heritage

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Coral reefs and other marine habitats will be better protected under a new plan that also maps out ways of re-populating Singapore's waters with giant clams and sea turtles.

The Marine Conservation Action Plan, helmed by the National Parks Board (NParks), is the first official one to protect and enhance Singapore's marine heritage.

It was launched yesterday by Minister of State for National Development Desmond Lee at the NParks' Festival of Biodiversity at VivoCity.

Among its projects is one to increase the population of the Neptune's Cup Sponge in local waters. The sponge was thought to be globally extinct in the early 1900s until it was re-discovered off St John's Island in 2011. Singapore is now the only country with a known living specimen.

NParks is working with Tropical Marine Science Institute researcher Lim Swee Cheng on the project.

He told *The Sunday Times* that researchers hope to understand "basic but important" questions on the animal's biology and ecology, such as how it feeds and reproduces, its growth rate and role in the ecosystem.

"We have been monitoring one sponge and discovered that it is a fast-growing species, contrary to what many scientists thought; it doubled in size in three years," he said.

Under the plan, NParks will also pilot two dive trails to get more Singaporeans interested in marine life.

Complete with 20 underwater signboards that serve as activity stations and markers, they will

open at Sisters' Islands Marine Park in September for approved operators to use for tours.

The action plan follows the Singapore Blue Plan 2009 – which called for a full marine survey and marine nature reserves – proposed by academics and civil society groups.

Coral expert Chou Loke Ming, who helped craft the 2009 document, said: "It was a long journey towards the country's first marine park.

"An officially designated plan is certainly needed as a follow-up to ensure that conservation effort is sustained on a permanent basis."

He added that the Sisters' Islands Marine Park is not large, and that it makes "ecological sense" to have a network of small marine parks to maintain biological connections between them.

The marine action plan is part of a broader Nature Conservation Masterplan, also announced by Mr Lee yesterday.

The latter is a framework which all of NParks' conservation work on land and sea will come under.

Dr Lena Chan, director of the NParks National Biodiversity Centre, said it will mean greater integration between different aspects of conservation work, from scientific research to community outreach and sharing of data.

"The masterplan will pull together all these different aspects to make it a comprehensive, systematic and integrated framework," she said.

Mr Lee added: "The masterplan will chart the direction of our conservation efforts for the next five years."

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