

# Marine biologist fourth S'porean to have own TED Talk

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SINGAPORE — This April, marine biologist Dr Neo Mei Lin will join the likes of tech giant Bill Gates and former US vice-president Al Gore in having her own TED Talk in Vancouver, Canada.

The 30-year-old is one of 15 change-makers this year – and the fourth Singaporean to date – selected by the non-profit organisation devoted to spreading ideas through its influential TED Talks as a TED Fellow.

She will get five minutes to share with the world her passion for giant clams and how these endangered species are vital to the survival of coral reefs.

Thrilled to join the over 400 young innovators across disciplines on the eight-year-old TED Fellow programme, Dr Neo told TODAY she aims to use the influential global platform to convince the world on the importance of marine conservation, in particular giant clams.

“(What) I really want to talk about is why saving giant clams may also save coral reefs too, and share why this very special group of animals are important to coral reefs, how their presence help enhance the coral reefs’ environment, and (also) shed light on further conservation messages,” the research fellow with the St John’s Island National Marine Laboratory and Tropical Marine Science Institute of National University of Singapore said.

Nicknamed “Mother of Clams” due to her work rearing and releasing giant clams into the wild, Dr Neo has faced down scores of people who do not take her work seriously. Even her own businessman father had curiously asked her “What do you actually do? Do you really study the clams everyday?”

What is so fascinating about these marine creatures, which can grow up to one metre long and weigh over 300kg, is that they play multiple roles in their life span of up to 100 years, she said.

There are only 12 species of giant clams in the Indo-Pacific, and they contribute to the health of coral reefs by serving both as a source of food for a variety of marine animals, including fishes and crabs, as well as shelters, which led her to nickname them “condominiums of the sea”.

Growing up as a child who always had a keen interest in flora, fauna and conservation of the environment, the elder child of a typical Singaporean family never imagined she would grow up to be a marine biologist. Her passion for these bivalves is something she stumbled upon by chance as a undergraduate in 2006, which has since grown into a life-long passion.

Her current focus of research is on how a batch of three-year-old giant clams cultivated in an aquarium can survive in the challenges of Singapore’s murky waters with low visibility, and hence, less sunlight. Getting sufficient sunlight is essential to giant clams’ survival.

She is also researching which of the 12 species of giant clams are more endangered, depending on their different locations or ecological roles. Based on the results, she hopes to then support why a certain species may need more help than others.

“Giant clams are like guardians of the seas. Because they can live up to 100 years-old, they can tell us a lot about the reef’s history and health. Whatever safeguards can be done for the giant clams, by extension, also benefit coral reefs,” said Dr Neo.

Among the other three Singaporeans to have been selected as a TED Fellow are Dr Baile Zhang, an assistant professor of physics at Nanyang Technological University, who shared his macroscopic invisibility cloak in 2013; and designer Tino Chow who spoke about combining his love for design, story telling, and the entrepreneurial way of thinking to help his clients come up with creative solutions to make the world a better place in 2009.