

Researcher raises red flag over poaching

He says it may be far worse than data shows as illegal traps found may not reflect true extent

Audrey Tan
Environment Correspondent

More work needs to be done to ensure the blight of animal poaching does not become a serious issue.

The call came from researcher Quek Xue Han, who noted that poaching may be a far bigger issue than suggested by official data.

There were at least 56 illegal land traps found over the past five years while the authorities have investigated 20 illegal fish traps in the past year or so.

These traps mainly target wildlife such as birds, boars and fish, but other animals have also been ensnared. In April, for example, an ot-

ter was found dead in an illegal cage near Changi Sailing Club.

Songbirds could be poached for the pet trade, while wild boars and fish could be trapped for food.

But Mr Quek, who has just completed a study on poaching for his honours thesis at National University of Singapore (NUS), said the number of illegal traps detected may not fully reflect the extent of poaching. He noted that informants are usually required to provide proof, such as visual evidence of animals entering cages, before the authorities can act.

Mr Quek, 24, said more information is needed to determine the extent of poaching before further action can be taken.

One way to do this is to create a national database using records from various government bodies or volunteer informants from nature groups who can contribute by being eyes on the ground.

Poaching records are maintained by the agency in charge of a particular area, such as park lands or water courses.

The National Parks Board has recorded more than 10 cases of illegal trapping within its parks and nature reserves over the last five years.

56

Number of illegal land traps found over the past five years.



A cable snare trap found by NUS senior tutor Marcus Chua in Mandai forest. The mammal scientist believes it could have been used to ensnare animals such as wild boars or pangolins. PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MARCUS CHUA

The Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority said it investigated 46 poaching cases related to the trapping of birds and boars between 2013 and April this year.

National water agency PUB, the custodian of Singapore's reservoirs, found 20 fish traps between the start of 2017 and May 25 this year.

Mr Quek said poaching is a dynamic issue, with animals and poachers moving in and out of areas managed by different agencies.

"A national database can move us towards a more integrated landscape perspective instead of our current site-specific approach," he added.

NUS biology lecturer N. Sivasothi, who supervised Mr Quek's research, said while poaching may not be as big of a problem here compared with other countries, it needs to be tackled before it escalates.

Singapore's forests, though fragmented, are rich in biodiversity,

and home to rare and critically endangered species such as pangolins – the most trafficked mammal in the world.

Mr Quek noted: "Surrounded by countries where poaching of these animals has devastated their numbers, the remaining population in Singapore is becoming even more valuable due to their regional scarcity."

audreyt@sph.com.sg