

Conservationists set out Blue Plan to preserve marine landscape

Govt will work with the marine community to realise common goals in ground-up initiative

Linette Lai

Conservationists have drawn up an extensive new plan to preserve more of Singapore's marine landscape – from mangroves and seagrass meadows to coastal forests and coral reefs.

Responding to the ground-up initiative, the Government has said it will see how it can work with the marine community to realise common goals.

The third iteration of the Blue Plan makes six recommendations, including improved laws to protect marine environments, formalised management systems for these areas and sustained funding for long-term research and monitoring programmes.

It also advocates better coordination between agencies and researchers, further measures to protect Singapore's remaining marine habitats and the inclusion of information about such habitats in the school curriculum.

More than 100 people contributed to the latest edition of the Blue

Plan, including biologists, geographers, environmental lawyers and representatives from non-governmental organisations.

The 220-page plan was presented to Second Minister for National Development Desmond Lee yesterday at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Mr Lee is also Minister for Social and Family Development.

"The amazing marine biodiversity that thrives along our shores and in our waters is something we should treasure and be proud of," Mr Lee said, noting that progress has been made since the second Blue Plan was launched in 2009.

"We will approach the proposals in this Blue Plan with the same spirit of collaboration and openness," he added. "The agencies will study the recommendations in detail and see how we can work with the marine community to realise some of the common goals."

Mr Lee said that apart from funding marine research, the Government will expand outreach and education efforts to help Singaporeans better appreciate the country's biodiversity. "You cannot protect what you don't love, and you can't love what you don't know," he said.

The first Blue Plan was drawn up in 2001, with the second one following eight years later. This year's instalment was led by five marine biologists, including Dr Zeehan Jaafar,

LEARNING TO VALUE MARINE TREASURE

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SECOND MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT DESMOND LEE, who said outreach and education efforts will be expanded to help Singaporeans better appreciate the nation's biodiversity.



The living reefs of Pulau Semakau. Protecting habitats like this is a goal. PHOTO: RIA TAN/WILDSINGAPORE

a lecturer at the NUS department of biological sciences.

Dr Jaafar said that the previous iteration of the Blue Plan was much shorter and focused primarily on the protection of coral reefs.

A year after it was launched, the National Parks Board led a five-year effort to conduct the first Comprehensive Marine Biodiversity Survey. In 2014, Sisters' Islands were designated a marine park as part of efforts to protect Singapore's coral reefs.

"But, in the past decade, there has been a shift in our research capabilities to look at other marine environments that are equally important, but not so front-and-centre as coral reefs," Dr Jaafar said. "As a result, we decided to relook some of the previous recommendations and fortify them."

One of those who worked on this year's Blue Plan was Ms Samantha Lai, 29, a PhD candidate at NUS specialising in seagrass research. She wants stronger legislation to protect the environment. "Marine habitats are part of our natural heritage," she said. "They are as much a part of our history as any building we have built, and we have so little left of it that we need to protect what there is."

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SEE HOME A11

Semakau – not just a landfill, but full of life

New Blue Plan by conservationists contains six recommendations to protect such habitats

Linette Lai

For many Singaporeans, Pulau Semakau is just an offshore landfill. But at low tide, one will find the island as well as the waters around it teeming with life, said marine biologist Huang Danwei. "You will see many mangrove trees and animals that live on these trees, and if you go seaward you will

see a very luxurious growth of seagrasses," said Dr Huang, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's biological sciences department. "If you go out even more, you will see a reef habitat with lots of corals." Protecting marine habitats like Pulau Semakau is a goal of the third Blue Plan, which was drawn up by conservationists like Dr Huang, presented to Second Minister for Na-

tional Development Desmond Lee yesterday. It contains six recommendations to protect such habitats in Singapore. Among them is a proposal that the coastal areas of certain islands be designated as marine reserves. These include Pulau Semakau and its neighbours Pulau Hantu and Pulau Jong, as well as Pulau Satumu and Pulau Biola. It also includes Pulau Ubin, which is home to Chek Jawa, one of Singapore's richest ecosystems where a variety of different habitats can be found. The plan also suggests that the waters around Lazarus, St John's and

Kusu islands be made no-fishing areas as they are established sites for coral nurseries. The latest Blue Plan states that: "Although marine habitats in Singapore are fragmented and small, these sites are each unique and host high diversity." For example, the tiny islands of Pulau Satumu and Pulau Biola have a wide variety of corals and other marine organisms. The Blue Plan notes that protecting the waters around these islands is "urgent as there are signs ship grounding have destroyed portions of these reefs". The movement to protect marine

habitats in Singapore has come a long way in the past few decades. Speaking to the audience at yesterday's event, veteran marine biologist Leo Tan recounted his struggle to get Labrador Nature Reserve designated as a protected area many years ago. "I started on a lonely journey in the 1970s trying to save one 300m stretch of rocky beach in Labrador," Prof Tan said. "It took 30 years before it was legislated as a nature reserve." In the 1980s and 1990s, non-governmental organisations initiated efforts to survey and conserve Singapore's coral reefs.

The first Blue Plan was produced in 2001 and the second in 2009. This year's 220-page Blue Plan is the most extensive yet, with more than 100 contributors from various fields. Mr Lee, who is also Minister for Social and Family Development, yesterday emphasised the importance of grounding such conservation efforts in science. "Only by understanding the marine ecosystems and their complexities better, can we develop sustainable solutions to manage and maintain them," he said. linettel@sph.com.sg

Protecting nation's marine landscape

The third Blue Plan proposes that the coastal areas around several clusters of islands be designated as marine reserves or no-fishing zones.



Formal management systems for marine environments



Better coordination between agencies and researchers



Sustained funding for research and long-term monitoring programmes



More measures to protect marine habitats



Improved laws to protect marine environments



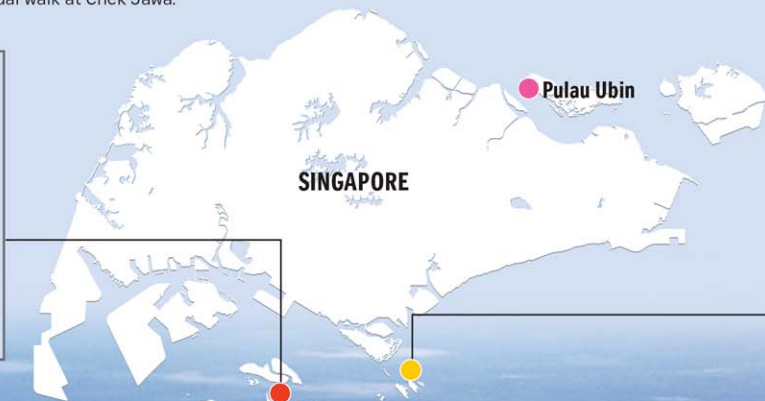
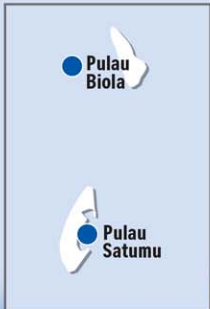
Inclusion of information about marine habitats in school curriculum



Intertidal walk at Chek Jawa.

Marine reserves

- Pulau Biola
Pulau Satumu
- Pulau Hantu
Pulau Semakau
Pulau Jong
- Pulau Ubin, including Chek Jawa



Living reefs of Pulau Semakau.



Photos: RIA TAN SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS