



# Study on life of ex-villagers on Southern Islands

Two-year project documents heritage and little-known stories from former islanders

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Singapore's young islanders were such good swimmers, they would encourage people to visit the Southern Islands, to throw coins into its waters for them to retrieve.

Former St John's villager Muhamad Akim Gimam, 69, said: "We had to dive in fast as the coins sank rapidly. We emerged with them in our hands or our mouths."

Mr Akim, a former logistics staff, said: "The currents were very strong and our elders would often stop us from jumping in. But swimming was in our blood and back then, there were no games or other activities. So after we finished our homework, we would slink off, take off our shirts – occasionally we were in our birthday suits – to play in the water."

The lives of many villagers on St John's and Lazarus islands and Pulau Seringat – now all linked by land – were invariably tied to the sea.

Their little-known stories are being uncovered by a research team led by cultural geographer Hamzah Muzaini from the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The project, supported by the National Heritage Board (NHB), includes oral history interviews which will lead to an exhibition, a workshop and a self-guided walking tour. The soft run of the tour will be in August.

The islands are now under the Singapore Land Authority (SLA). Sentosa Development Corporation was the managing agent from 1976 to 2017.

The researchers said the Singapore Tourism Board had once discussed plans to transform the islands into a resort.

NHB assistant chief executive of policy and community, Mr Alvin Tan, said it supported the project because "it focuses on the little-studied inter-relationships between the islands' cultural and natural heritage".

He added: "The project adopts a participatory approach involving former residents which we believe will yield useful insights into life on these islands in the past."

Dr Hamzah said the islands, now devoid of permanent occupants, were once home to thriving communities. He said the islanders recalled that Lazarus Island was home to 40 Malay families from the 1950s to 1970s. Each family had 12 members on average.



Above: The new kitchen, with induction cookers plus new pots and cooking ware. Tables will also be replaced.

Left: Former St John's villager Muhamad Akim Gimam (far left) showing NUS' Dr Hamzah Muzaini some old photos on his cellphone. PHOTOS: GIN TAY, GRACE CHONG

## St John's Island campsite upgraded

Campers can expect refreshed accommodation facilities on St John's Island. The Singapore Land Authority (SLA), which manages and maintains the island, has upgraded a campsite there, as well as a colonial-era bungalow.

With a capacity of about 50 people, the campsite – one of five such facilities there – has new kitchen appliances, a raised platform for campers to sleep on with their sleeping bags, as well as a digital smart-lock system.

In the kitchen, dated stove tops and gas canisters have been replaced with portable induction cookers. Meanwhile, the new lock system will allow campers to access the campsite using a one-time password sent to their mobilephones.

The four-bedroom bungalow, with a capacity of about 10 people, underwent some structural repairs.

This included fixing its floors.

The wooden structure, known as Bungalow 53, has always been quite popular with campers on weekends.

The authority had cordoned off the island's campsites, lagoon and holiday bungalow area in April last year because traces of asbestos were discovered in construction debris nearby.

SLA said later that month that it planned to reopen the island's campsites in mid-2019 after upgrading and maintenance works – done in keeping with the rustic nature of the space – have been completed. The asbestos removal efforts were completed at the end of last year.

The new amenities and upgraded features could be rolled out to the island's other campsites if campers give positive feedback on the changes.

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There was also one Chinese and one Indian family living there. According to the 1957 census, there were altogether 251 residents living there, with 13 Chinese, three Indians and one Pakistani.

Dr Hamzah said the island has a longer history tied to the *orang laut*, or sea nomads, who were among the original inhabitants of Singapore.

He said Sir Stamford Raffles' fleet of ships anchored off St John's Island and it was likely the *orang laut* of Lazarus Island – representatives of ruler Abdul Rahman, the Temenggong of Johor – had met the British.

Dr Hamzah added: "Much of what has been chronicled has been on St John's Island as a quarantine station, an opium treatment centre and then a drug rehabilitation centre."

"There is less information on the inhabitants, especially those on Lazarus Island, which was populated even before St John's Island became significant."

The two-year-long project will conclude at the end of the year. It follows a slew of projects which have emerged over the years to document Singapore's islands.

Last year, The Straits Times reported on a team from the NUS Department of Architecture which documented the traditional construction methods of kampung houses on Pulau Ubin.

Dr Hamzah said his team hopes to make recommendations on future plans for the islands. Last month, it put out a public survey seeking views on what the islands could be used for, among other things.

Dr Sonia Lam-Knott, a team member and a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute, said: "If they can continue their function as a place for recreation, that would be good. However, there should also be better amenities and transportation for Singaporeans to easily access these island spaces."

The Straits Times understands the SLA, the Southern Islands' manager, is working to maintain the rustic nature of the islands.

The team will be giving an informal assessment of the structures on the islands to highlight those worth preserving. Among these are the St John's Island English School buildings, former quarantine facilities and colonial-era villas.

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