

Civets on Ubin get GPS collars

Toddy cat's role as 'seed
disperser' to be tracked

By CAROLYN KHEW

THEY are known for producing one of the most expensive coffees in the world – kopi luwak or civet coffee – but the common palm civets are not so well known for their ecological role.

A student researcher is seeking to find out more about that role, and has collared three common palm civets on Pulau Ubin for that purpose. It is part of an overall project to understand the nocturnal species, which is native to Singapore.

Ms Fung Tze Kwan, 26, who is doing her Master of Science programme at the National University of Singapore (NUS), hopes to understand the civets' role as "seed dispersers" in the ecosystem. She also wants to find out more about what they eat, where they live and their movements.

Nicknamed the toddy cat, the animal eats mostly fruit and passes out the seeds in its faeces. That is how civet coffee is produced – the coffee beans are extracted from the dung.

This digestive process means civets could play an important role in "forest regeneration", said Mr N. Sivasothi, a senior lecturer at the NUS Department of Biological Sciences who supervises Ms Fung's research.

Ms Fung said: "As (the civets) move around and defecate, the seeds (in their dung) will then germinate." Forest regeneration is important as some animals are dependent on trees found in forests for food and shelter.

Using collars equipped with global positioning system on the animals means less disturbance to them in the long run, said wildlife consultant Subaraj Rajathurai. "It can help researchers obtain more data without intruding into their daily lives," he said, explaining that wildlife can be disturbed by human scent or noise when researchers intrude into their natural habitats during field work.

The use of the collars would also enable Ms Fung and other volunteers in the project to spend less time on the field collecting data. The project to collar the civets is funded by Wildlife Reserves Singapore Conservation Fund. The National Parks Board (NParks) granted Ms Fung a permit to collar the civets and to conduct her research on Pulau Ubin.

"Only animals that were suitable for sedation and collaring after assessment were sedated by the vets in the field," said Ms Fung, adding that protocols used to collar the civets were approved by the NUS Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee and NParks. Pulau Ubin was chosen because there are more known sightings of the creatures there.

Civets live mostly in forested areas even though they have been spotted in residential areas such as Siglap, and colonial houses near Portsdown Road and Seletar Camp.

Wildlife experts say there are no reliable estimates of the civet population here so far as they are nocturnal and their home range has yet to be determined. It is believed there are two species in Singapore – the common palm civet and the rarer three-striped palm civet, said Mr Subaraj. Two other species found here previously – the Malay civet and the large Indian civet – have not had reported sightings in the past two decades, he said.

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