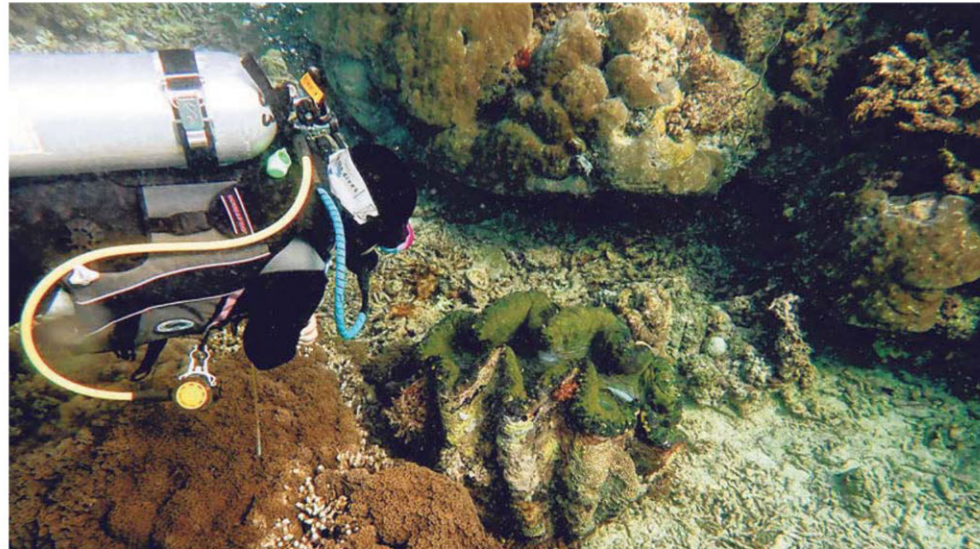


Dr Neo observing a *Tridacna gigas* while diving in Sipadan Island, Malaysia, in 2018. A 2017 study of giant clams worldwide led by her found that the world's largest giant clam species is the most threatened mollusc.
PHOTO: TRISTAN TANG



The *Tridacna noae* (above), or Noah's giant clam, in a photo taken in the Ryukyu Islands in 2016, and the *Tridacna maxima* (left), or Small giant clam, in Perhentian Islands, Malaysia, in 2017. The population of these coastal giants is falling.
PHOTOS: NEO MEI LIN

NUS researcher receives prestigious marine fellowship

She will get \$202k over three years to further research on giant clam conservation in region

Shabana Begum

A local scientist is the first from Singapore to receive a prestigious fellowship in marine conservation under the global research organisation Pew.

Dr Neo Mei Lin, 34, a National

University of Singapore (NUS) researcher of giant clams, was on Wednesday named a marine fellow by The Pew Charitable Trusts, along with eight other scientists worldwide.

Under the fellowship, Dr Neo will receive US\$150,000 (\$202,000) over three years to further her research on giant clam

conservation in South-east Asia.

Dr Neo, who has been studying giant clams since 2006, said: "I am very delighted to receive the Pew Marine Fellowship in Marine Conservation as it validates my years of research and outreach efforts on the giant clams."

"The programme will allow me to join the global community of marine conservationists working to solve ocean issues."

Giant clams – which can grow to up to 1.2m long – are known for their intricate body patterns and



Dr Neo Mei Lin was named a marine fellow by The Pew Charitable Trusts, along with eight other scientists worldwide. PHOTO: THE ALUMNUS

fan-shaped shells. In Singapore, they live among corals in the Republic's southern shores and islands.

South-east Asia is one of the few regions in the world with a high diversity of giant clam species. But the population of these coastal giants – highly prized as delicacies and deco-

orative materials – is declining.

A 2017 study of giant clams worldwide led by Dr Neo found that the world's largest giant clam species, the *Tridacna gigas*, is the most threatened mollusc.

Out of 31 sites around the world where the species was known to be

present, its population was either severely depleted or could no longer be found at 26 sites.

Dr Neo, a senior research fellow at NUS' Tropical Marine Science Institute, will examine current trends in giant clam harvesting, consumption and trade in the region, and map out areas where giant clams are most at risk.

With the data gathered, she aims to conduct a first-of-its-kind regional workshop in mid-2022 to share updates on research, identify reasons for population decline and recommend ways to boost protection of the clams.

The clams' large size could be due to their ability to feed in two ways – by using their gills to capture food and by ingesting nutrition produced by the photosynthetic algae that grow in their folds.

Giant clams are also a source of food for fish and crabs, and they can help to clean up the water column by filtering out nutrients and other larger particles.

The fellowship currently comprises 189 researchers from 40 countries.

nshab@sph.com.sg