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PLANET | PEOPLE | PARTNERS

UNDER THE GREEN ROOF

NSS ECO-JOURNEY GOES TO SEPETANG

Conversations for conservation at the ESN Symposium

Tagore Forest: A vital but unprotected wilderness

What can we learn from the state of nature in Malaysia?



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MESSAGE

We'll reconnect people with nature, and restore habitats

Ms Huang Ningxin

Executive Director, Nature Society Singapore Secretariat

AS WE MOVE INTO 2026, NSS is taking a new direction as we aim to **reconnect people with nature and restore habitats**.

This year, we are working more closely with schools to develop interests and build competencies in both students and teachers through several initiatives. Firstly, there is ESN+, a collaboration between the NSS Every Singaporean a Naturalist (ESN) and NParks' Greening Schools with Biodiversity programmes. Next, we are launching a 15-week CCA programme for schools, and thirdly we will provide professional development for teachers and help them incorporate nature education in their day-to-day school curriculum.

These new programmes will be supported by several Eco-Journeys set aside for the overseas professional development of teachers. Starting this year, our Eco-Journeys programme will be open to members of the public, for them to learn about site-based conservation, conservation business, conservation governance, community-led conservation, and other concepts that anchor the experiences we curate.

We are also refreshing our habitat restoration efforts. Our NSS Rewilding team aims to plant at least 350 trees this year. We are partnering with Windsor Nature Park to support the Invasive Species Management programme, with the goal of removing at least 700kg of the invasive Zanzibar Yam.

We recognise that none of this can be done alone. To reconnect people with nature and restore habitats, we need a strong and growing community of supporters, advocates and partners who believe in safeguarding Singapore's natural heritage. We invite you to journey with us — follow our work, spread the word about our programmes, bring your schools, families and friends to our initiatives, and participate in our Eco-Journeys and restoration efforts. Your involvement will strengthen our voice and expand our impact.



NSS was honoured to welcome Minister of State for National Development, Mr Alvin Tan (back row, fourth from left), along with staff from the Ministry of National Development and NParks to our office on 20 Jan 2026. We valued the opportunity to discuss the challenges of nature conservation in Singapore, and to share thoughtful insights. Photo: Nature Society Singapore

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ON THE COVER An awe-inspiring view of the “crown shyness” phenomenon, as viewed from the ground at a forest reserve managed by Forest Research Institute Malaysia, one of the stops in the NSS Eco-Journey to Kuala Sepetang. Photo: Nature Society Singapore

NATURE WATCH

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Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM) is one of the world's leading institutions in tropical forestry research. Eco-Journey participants will visit FRIM's Forest Skywalk, which offers panoramic views of the forest and the Kuala Lumpur skyline.

JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF NATURE

ECO-JOURNEYS TAKE TRAVELLERS BEYOND MERE 'ECO-TOURS'

A trip to experience nature should help participants feel more knowledgeable about species and natural landscapes and, even better, support the local communities that live within these environments. **Emily Kang** has more on what she hopes to discover on Eco-Journey Sepetang — the first such trip that NSS is organising for members and the public.

Text by **EMILY KANG**

Photos by **NATURE SOCIETY SINGAPORE**

Many of us chase nature for its beauty, only to later wrestle quietly with what our presence might have cost it. Late last year, my family was on a kayaking trip on a crystal-clear lake in a neighbouring country. Our local guide pointed out the water lilies the community was carefully conserving. That was when we began to notice the submerged logs and tree stumps beneath the water's surface. It struck me that part of the original mangrove may have been cleared to make way for recreation — and my heart ached.

As we paddled deeper into the mangroves, we reached a small enclave where some 30 canoes were parked for tourists to swim in the cool, clear waters. Each time I had to push against the trees to navigate out of the crowded, narrow channels, I found myself apologising under my breath. What I wanted next wasn't another escape into nature, but a way to travel that actually supports the places and people who protect it.



One of FRIM's missions is to provide and develop key scientific knowledge for safeguarding tropical-forest wildlife like the Silver Langur, which can be found in the institute's forest-restoration project.



The "crown shyness" phenomenon exhibited by Kapur trees (*Dryobalanops aromatica*) is one of the attractions at the FRIM just outside Kuala Lumpur.

The inaugural NSS Eco-Journey in September 2025 took teachers to Bintan, and I remember wishing at the time that non-educators could have been allowed to join them. Who better to travel with on a learning journey about conservation than NSS, which has built trusted partnerships with regional NGOs and communities over the years?

So when I heard that the Eco-Journey programme would now be open to the public, with priority for NSS members, I signed up without batting an eyelid. For guilt-ridden nature lovers like me, it was time to step beyond eco-tours and choose experiences that would give us confidence that the places we love will still be around in years to come.

There will be two public runs of the Eco-Journey programme to Kuala Sepetang in June and July 2026. Sepetang is located within the Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve along the west coast of Perak state in Peninsular Malaysia. Gazetted for protection in the early 1900s, the forest reserve is recognised internationally as one of the world's best-



The local community in Sepetang are mostly fisherfolk. Much of their catch comes from the fish reared in kelongs located at the mouth of Sepetang River.

There will be two public runs of the Eco-Journey programme to Kuala Sepetang in June and July 2026. Sepetang is located within the Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve, which is recognised internationally as one of the world's best-managed mangrove ecosystems.

managed mangrove ecosystems. Participants of the Eco-Journey will learn how the local forestry department has integrated sustainable forestry and conservation for more than a hundred years and counting.

Before visiting Sepetang, the participants will first arrive in Kuala Lumpur, and subsequently make a stop at the Forest Research Institute Malaysia, which manages a forest-restoration project started in the 1920s in Selangor state. The project is widely recognised as one of the earliest large-scale restoration efforts in the region, transforming a degraded landscape marred by tin-mining into a mature, biodiverse lowland rain-forest. As they walk under the "green roof" formed by the canopy of towering trees, participants will get to witness what sustained, long-term forest restoration can achieve.

Mr Albert Liu, Assistant Director (Conservation) at NSS, said one of the objectives of the Eco-Journey programme is for participants to learn how nature, community, and culture are interconnected and sustain one another.

KUALA SEPETANG AND THE MATANG MANGROVE FOREST RESERVE

More details on EJ-Septang on facing page



Kuala Sepetang (once known as Port Weld) is the gateway to Matang forest, one of the largest expanses of mangroves in Malaysia.

▶ In mangrove habitats, especially along Sepetang River in the Matang forest, **fireflies** of the Pteroptyx genus gather in huge numbers on plants like the Berembang tree (*Sonneratia caseolaris*). When they flash in synchrony during mating displays, the entire tree appears to pulse with light, almost like a live Christmas tree. Depending on the weather and other conditions, evening firefly boat tours can be conducted during Eco-Journey Sepetang.



▲ Boardwalks in the Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve allow visitors to safely explore the protected area at their own pace. The mangrove is also well-known for its fireflies, and boat tours are available in the evenings, depending on weather and tides.

▶ Kuala Sepetang has a long tradition of **charcoal-production**. Many of the charcoal kilns here are a legacy of pre-war Japanese businesses, which introduced the technology in the 1930s. Japan remains one of the main importers of Malaysia's mangrove charcoal. The fuel is used to grill delicacies like yakitori and unagi because of its density, long burn time and clean flames. The kilns today face the challenge of balancing the preservation of a cultural tradition and the rising demand for environmental sustainability.



▶ The wood for charcoal production in Sepetang is harvested from mangrove trees that must be at least 30 years old. To maintain their government permits, the local charcoal industry must replace the harvested trees by replanting them.



▲ The traditional charcoal kilns in Sepetang are a legacy of pre-war Japanese businesses, and Japan remains one of the main importers of Malaysian charcoal today.

▶ Mangrove bark can be boiled to extract tannins, producing earthy **dyes for fabrics** similar to batik, and worn by locals. Participants of Eco-Journey Sepetang would get to see the traditional "ni siap" dyeing method used by local fishermen to produce fabrics that serve as an alternative livelihood.



▶ "Ni siap" is a traditional dyeing method practised in Kuala Sepetang. The method's name comes from Teochew, and it means "dyeing with hard water".

Through Eco-Journeys, NSS hopes that members and participants will be motivated to deepen their appreciation and commitment to nature and conservation.

During last year's Eco-Journey Bintan, for example, the participating educators discovered how local beekeepers played a vital role in pollinating flowers and renewing the forest. They also saw how coffee farming helped to keep the bees well-fed because the plants would flower all year. The local stakeholders that partnered with NSS to organise Eco-Journey Bintan were equally committed to the participants' learning journey. Laila, founder and owner of the stingless bee farm and organic coffee farm in Bintan, said: "I hope the (participants) who visit our place can learn about nature, and understand how everything is connected."

Indeed, be it in Bintan, Malaysia or Singapore, the ecosystems of our region are connected. We share the same tropical climate, seas and marine currents, and bird migratory routes. Nature knows no boundaries — and the insights gained from one corner of Southeast Asia could very well inform how we relate to Singapore's natural environment. Through Eco-Journeys, NSS hopes that members and participants will be motivated to deepen their appreciation and commitment to nature and conservation.



The forest-restoration project at FRIM is recognised as one of the earliest large-scale restoration efforts in the region.

There was a quote from one participant of Eco-Journey Bintan that resonated with me: "I think the most surprising moment for me was just seeing how passionate everyone here was. The people I learnt from — from the people in Bintan to our own teachers from across Singapore — just the passion itself was so infectious. It has inspired me to really get things going back in school."

I think this cross-pollination of passion could well be one of the best intangible benefits of travelling with like-minded nature-lovers, and I very much look forward to my own Eco-Journey with NSS. 🌿



Time slows down in Kuala Sepetang, as visitors and residents become attuned with natural cycles.

ABOUT

NSS Eco-Journeys

The Eco-Journey programme is an immersive overseas learning experience curated by NSS to include:

- visits to sites of conservation significance
- interactions with local communities and champions
- nature-based experiences, including chance encounters with wildlife
- facilitated workshops and reflection sessions

The programme harnesses NSS' partnerships with regional communities and NGOs to create a transformative journey that would spur participants to think hard about what it takes to achieve environmental sustainability.

We believe that conservation cannot be treated like a "glass dome". Flora and fauna arrive to our shores from elsewhere in the region — if they are not thriving in their home range, then nature in Singapore will likewise be affected.

Through Eco-Journeys, we hope our participants will better appreciate the circumstances that enable or obstruct conservation in other places.



Join us!

Eco-Journey Sepetang

There will be two upcoming Eco-Journey trips to Sepetang this year:

- **June 2026:** For professional development
- **July 2026:** For the public, with priority for NSS members

Please visit nss.org.sg/sepelang-eco-journey to find out more and register for a trip.



Emily Kang started out as a civil engineer, managed residential and commercial properties and tenants, then made

a mid-career switch to learning and development. She enjoys planning holidays off the beaten track for her outdoorsy family of five and birdwatching. She contributed this article in her personal capacity.

CONVERSATIONS

Now in its fourth year, the NSS ESN 4th Symposium 2025 celebrated and recognised the initiatives taken by participating schools and students to further their journeys towards greater awareness of nature, and inspiring others to join them.

Text by **KAVENEE BALU**

Photos by **BRANDON KOH**

In November, Nature Society Singapore's Every Singaporean a Naturalist (ESN) 4th Symposium 2025 brought together a vibrant community of learners, leaders, and change-makers, all united by one belief: that when we collaborate, we move closer to a world where people and nature thrive side by side. Organised by NSS, and hosted by **Raffles Girls' School (Secondary)** (RGS), the event welcomed over 190 students and teachers from 17 schools, creating a dynamic space for celebration and good conversation.

From the moment the first attendees signed in, the atmosphere buzzed with curiosity and

optimism. Teachers guided excited students to the various interactive booths, and conversations drifted between science projects and field observations, setting the tone for a day that celebrated both knowledge and collaboration. Although each person arrived with a unique perspective, their purpose was shared: Strengthening our collective approach to caring for the natural world.

A key highlight of the symposium was the series of project presentations delivered by students deeply committed to environmental education.

Mee Toh School was represented by members of their Nature Lovers Club, who shared their stories on how they came to appreciate the ecosystems in their school during their "Tues-Dates with Nature". They presented the data they collected, demonstrating how young learners can contribute meaningfully to citizen science. Through this process, they were inspired to take on the role of eco-guides, giving guided tours and presentations, with the hope of inspiring their peers to appreciate the nature around them.

The students of **RGS** impressed the audience with an in-depth look at their biodiversity trails. Students from the school's Project BioBliss and TheWildSide groups showcased the importance of appreciating biodiversity, and demonstrated how urban spaces can support rich ecological life when thoughtfully managed. Project BioBliss implemented this by equipping the youth in their school with essential skills and knowledge through meaning-



The team from Mee Toh School shared their stories of how they came to appreciate the ecosystems in their school.

for CONSERVATION

Reflections from the ESN Symposium



As hosts of the NSS ESN 4th Symposium, RGS students took the visiting students on a tour of their school's Biodiversity Trail, and their Edible Garden.

ful nature-related activities. The WildSide worked with the Design & Technology department to create signs for plants that featured names and fun facts. The two teams also worked together to organise a Stamp Design Competition that featured Singapore's wildlife, and provided their schoolmates with the opportunity to learn more about the species.

They exemplified this in the afternoon when they led two guided experiences, a Biodiversity Trail Tour and an Edible Garden Tour, which gave participants an up-close look at how school environments can become thriving learning landscapes.

CHIJ Secondary showcased their creation, Environmental Warriors, a card game that takes

a unique approach to spreading awareness of nature and sustainability. The team talked about how they were able to successfully spread awareness on nature to their schoolmates. They were inspired to create the game after attending the NSS ESN 2nd Symposium 2023.

By the following year, they had turned the idea into a meaningful product, and they presented it at the symposium in 2024. This time, they were back to share their



The team from CHI J Secondary showcased the card game they created and improved upon over two years as a fun way to spread awareness of nature and sustainability.

experience in further developing Environmental Warriors through a collaboration with their fellow co-curricular clubs iGrow@IJ, who conceptualised new characters, and Arts Alive, who provided the visuals and artwork.

Meanwhile, **Unity Secondary School** presented their long-term plan for initiating and training student leaders to take charge of their environmental club in future years. To ensure continuity, the team created a resource package consisting of strategies, digital tools, and how-to instructions for using field guides.

The symposium grounds were buzzing with activity as attendees explored interactive booths. One of the booths was run by **My First Skool @ 6 Segar Road**, whose teach-

ers showcased early-childhood nature activities that encourage young children to observe, and connect with the world around them. Their display reminded everyone that environmental stewardship begins long before the teenage years.

Other booths featured student-led conservation campaigns and projects that sparked awareness. Participants moved between stations, exchange-



Various schools set up interactive booths in the symposium grounds to showcase creative ways to help students learn about the importance of nature.

Highest Number of Research-grade Observations in 2025

Pre-school category

My First Skool @ 6 Segar Road [241 observations]

Primary category

1st place: Yumin Primary School
109 observations

2nd place: Sembawang Primary School
71 observations

3rd place: Yu Neng Primary School
51 observations

Secondary category

1st place: Raffles Girls' School (Secondary)
121 observations

2nd place: CHI J Secondary
51 observations

3rd place: Assumption English School
24 observations

Most Improved School in 2025

1st place: Teck Whye Primary School

2nd place: West Spring Primary School



The duo from Unity Secondary School inspired their peers with their long-term plan for training fellow student leaders to take charge of their environmental club.

ing questions, ideas, and practical tips, an embodiment of the day's collaborative spirit.

No gathering of passionate environmental stewards would be complete without acknowledging the dedication that drives their work. This year's symposium included a warm and heartfelt Appreciation and Awards Ceremony to honour schools that have gone above and beyond in their monitoring and conservation efforts.

The School Monitoring Award, such as the Highest Research-grade Observations in 2025, celebrated



The discussions and presentations at the symposium were recorded in this infographic by June Yeo of Artese Studio.



ESN schools that achieved remarkable results from monitoring the biodiversity in their campuses were recognised at the symposium.



The staff of the NSS Secretariat and Education Committee are grateful for the enthusiastic response and feedback from all participating schools. (Back row, from left: Kerry Pereira, Bryan Tan, Dylan Tan, Tan Beng Chiah, Kavene Balu; front row, from left: Shreeyaa Subra, John Yip, Michelle Hariff, Sung Mei Yee, Cherrie Toh.)

institutions that have contributed the most number of high-quality environmental data in one year. These long-term efforts not only strengthen research but also show how classroom learning can extend meaningfully into real-world scientific practice. The data helps researchers understand species distribution and biodiversity trends, and research-grade data are shared with the Global Biodiversity Information Facility, allowing research to be done on a global scale.

The Most Improved Award recognised schools that made exceptional progress over the past year. The applause, cheers, and proud smiles reflected a community that roots for one another's growth.

As the day drew to a close, one shared sentiment echoed through conversations: that caring for the natural world is not the responsibility of one school, one organisation, or one generation. It is a collective journey. The symposium demonstrated the power of bringing people together, students learning from students, teachers exchanging ideas, and imagining new possibilities.

With renewed energy, strengthened partnerships, and a commitment to continue learning from one another, this year's Every Singaporean a Naturalist Symposium stands as a testament to what can be achieved when we grow together. 🌱

The Raffles' Banded Langur is one of the world's rarest primates, and Singapore's most critically endangered arboreal mammal. Photo: Andie Ang

TAGORE FOREST

Our Most Important Unprotected Wilderness

Text by **SANKAR ANANTHANARAYANAN** and **ANDIE ANG**

In the central green matrix of Singapore, just east of the safeguarded expanse of the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, lies a forest at a crossroads. Tagore Forest, a 100-hectare green refuge, represents something critical: It is Singapore's most important unprotected forest.

A pair of inky, soulful eyes peer through a curtain of leaves, set in a face framed by startling white fur. This is the Raffles' Banded Langur (*Presbytis femoralis*), one of the world's rarest primates, and Singapore's most critically endangered arboreal mammal. Fewer than 80 remain in Singapore. The langurs — and an entire living community of plants, animals, and fungi — can be found in a modest patch of woods called Tagore Forest.

Langurs are not mere residents; they are active gardeners of the forest.

Feeding on leaves and fruits, they disperse seeds that help regenerate the environment. They depend on trees for food and shelter and, crucially, on connected forests to roam and breed. Once widespread, langurs are now largely confined to the Central Catchment Nature Reserve and its immediate fringes. Here, Tagore plays a critical role.

While the langur captivates attention, Tagore shelters a chorus of other species. The melodious Straw-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus zeylanicus*) — whose song makes it a target of the illegal pet trade — finds solace here. The shy but beautiful

Asian Emerald Dove (*Chalcophaps indica*) potters about in the undergrowth, foraging for food. As night falls, the pipping calls of Cinnamon Bush Frogs (*Nyctixalus pictus*) can be heard from atop some distant tree. These unassuming residents are indicators of a vibrant ecosystem – a mature forest with immense

value for the future of Singapore’s green spaces.

At present, Tagore Forest cannot be accessed without a permit, and no public biodiversity baseline survey has been conducted. Nevertheless, the rich diversity of flora and fauna just across the road at Old Upper Thomson Road and

At present, Tagore Forest cannot be accessed without a permit, and no public biodiversity baseline survey has been conducted. Nevertheless, the rich diversity of flora and fauna just across the road at Old Upper Thomson Road and Thomson Nature Park gives us an idea of what species can likely be found here.



The Cinnamon Bush Frog (*Nyctixalus pictus*) is native to Singapore and listed as vulnerable in the Singapore Red Data Book. Photo: Law Ing Sind & Law Ingg Thong



Tagore Forest is a 100ha site on the fringes of the nearby Thomson Nature Park and the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, and it is home to a rich variety of local wildlife. Map by Nature Society Singapore



While we do not know for sure if the Slow Loris can be found in Tagore Forest, the habitat certainly seems adequate to support them. In fact, a Slow Loris was detected in the adjacent Teacher's Estate, before it was developed.

unfortunate demise of a Reticulated Python, Dog-toothed Cat Snake, a King Cobra, Malayan Water Monitor Lizard and a Clouded Monitor Lizard due to wildlife vehicular collisions. It is clear that these animals utilise the forests on either side of Upper Thomson Road.

Besides reptiles and amphibians, there are also wonderful mammals to be found in this area. If you are very lucky (and very observant), you may even spot a Slow Loris (*Nycticebus coucang*) along Old Upper Thomson Road. While we do not know for sure if they can be found in Tagore Forest, the habitat certainly seems adequate to support them. In fact, a Slow Loris was detected in the adjacent Teacher's Estate, before it was developed.

These shy and beautiful mammals live up to their name, slowly crawling along branches high up in the trees. Slow Lorises are unique among mammals because they secrete venom from glands on their elbows. The lorises would lick and activate this venom, giving them a toxic bite. But, as with all animals, they are harmless if left alone.

Given its rich biodiversity, Tagore Forest is easily our most important unprotected wilderness, and its future should not be left to chance. Through active participation – such as by staying informed on conservation science (see the story on the Singapore Terrestrial Conservation Plan on next page), engaging in public consultations, and sharing our thoughts and opinions with decision-makers – we can make a difference. As residents of Singapore, our collective voice and vigilance are crucial for shaping a truly sustainable City in Nature. 🌳

The critically endangered Slow Loris is the only venomous primate in Singapore. They are very hard to spot, but that has not deterred poachers from trapping them for the illegal pet trade. Photo: Law Ing Sind & Law Ingg Thong

Thomson Nature Park gives us an idea of what species can likely be found here.

For example, Wagler's Pit Vipers (*Tropidolaemus wagleri*) are common residents in this part of the woods. These reptiles, with their beautiful sexually dimorphic colouration, are often found along the side of Old Upper Thomson Road. They can also be found in Tagore and, unfortunately, roadkill of this species occasionally appears on the road adjacent to the forest. Wagler's

Pit Vipers prey on a variety of small vertebrates like lizards, birds and small mammals, using their heat-sensing pits to detect them, even in complete darkness.

Many incredible reptiles have been detected here, attempting to make the daunting crossing between Old Upper Thomson Road and Tagore Forest. Unfortunately, many are run over by traffic along the six-lane Upper Thomson Road. The Herpetological Society of Singapore's roadkill project has documented the

SINGAPORE TERRESTRIAL CONSERVATION PLAN

The **Singapore Terrestrial Conservation Plan (STCP)** (<https://sg-tc-plan.weebly.com/>) is a collaborative document that consolidates the knowledge, views, concerns, and recommendations for the conservation of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems and the biodiversity of Singapore. It was co-authored by nearly 40 members of Singapore’s environmental civil society.

The document was published in 2024 and lays out several conservation priorities for the nation. It emphasises the conservation of core biodiversity areas, while restoring and rehabilitating buffer zones, creating ecological corridors to link existing habitats, enhancing legal protections and enforcements for biodiversity and habitat, as well as fostering community stewardship in the nation. By adopting a science-based, multi-taxon approach, the STCP aims to safeguard Singapore’s terrestrial ecosystems, ensuring that nature always has a place alongside urban development.

The very first recommendation of the STCP identifies important terrestrial spaces for enhanced conservation. It “proposes the protection of Tagore Forest as a Nature Park be studied, notwithstanding its current zoning for Residential Use”. We believe that viable and mature habitats like Tagore Forest must be prioritised for biodiversity. Not only would it function as a buffer forest for the sensitive core of the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, but it could also be an important green space for residents in the area to use and benefit from.

Findings from NParks’ Ecological Profiling Exercise have also scientifically validated Tagore’s role as a key stepping stone connecting the northeastern forests in Pulau Ubin, Pulau Tekong and Serangoon to the Central Catchment Nature Reserve. It is a living bridge in Singapore’s central ecological network. For the Raffles’ Banded Langur – a species that requires genetic exchange and safe dispersal routes – these connective tissues are not a luxury. They are the very pathways that would prevent population collapse.



A male Wagler's Pit Viper. The female of the species is usually larger, with black scales, green spots and yellow bands, and a greenish-white underside. Photo: Law Ing Sind & Law Ingg Thong



Sankar Ananthanarayanan

is a co-founder of the Herpetological Society of Singapore (HSS), a volunteer-run society dedicated to the conservation and study of reptiles and amphibians in Singapore. He is a co-author of the recently published *Field Guide to the Reptiles and Amphibians of Singapore*. He is currently a PhD Candidate at the National University of Singapore, where he studies reptile extinctions and reintroductions.



Andie Ang holds a BSc and a MSc from NUS and a PhD from the University of Colorado Boulder. She is Head of Species Grants

and Impact at Mandai Nature, Deputy Chair of the IUCN Primate Group, and President of Jane Goodall Institute (Singapore).

PROTECT

Quo vadis, o Malaysia?

A look at its natural environment

Text by NG SEAN FONG

Photos by MALAYSIAN NATURE SOCIETY



Malaysia's biological diversity – with its countless floral and faunal species, and the habitats and ecosystems that they form – have been world-renowned ever since explorers, traders, and naturalists set foot in the Malay Peninsula in the 15th century. The discoveries of Malaysia's natural and ecological marvels have been elucidated in scientific journals in the decades since, and these became the baseline of the country's natural history. However, in the late 20th and early 21st century, rapid development and wanton exploitation of natural resources have driven the decline of Malaysia's biodiversity.

In 1991, the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) — together with the late Dr Ruth Kiew as editor — published *The State of Nature Conservation in Malaysia (SoNC)*. SoNC substantiated a collection of articles describing the status of important and/or prominent floral and faunal species, as well as habitats and ecosystems in Malaysia at the time. It was a contemporary snapshot of the natural environment in Malaysia, highlighting the biodiversity loss that occurred in the preceding years, and the efforts undertaken to conserve it.

And now, 34 years later, MNS took up the reins once again to lead a coordinated effort to publish an updated SoNC for 2025. The revised *State of Nature Conservation in Malaysia 2025 (SoNC 2025)* explores four key themes: 1) **flora**; 2) **fauna**; 3) **Indigenous Peoples**; and (4) **Anthropocene**.

As an initial step, the SoNC 2025 Symposium was held at Dorsett Grand Subang, from 25 to 27 Nov 2025, to serve as a platform for convening and enabling the Chapter Leads to present their Chapters to a learned audience for constructive feedback. The broad overview from the Symposium attendees is that biodiversity loss is not halting, the position of the Indigenous Peoples as rights-holders and customary owners of the land is still poorly respected and not upheld, and the impacts of the Anthropocene are more pronounced than ever before.

The forests of Malaysia, dominated by the towering Dipterocarp trees that form stratified layers of habitat with differing levels of sunlight, in which various other floral species have evolved to thrive and occupy their distinctive ecological niches, are at risk of disappearing.

The timber-tree species that constitute the majority of the biomass found in the lowland Dipterocarp forests extracted in the past are not recovering as naturally intended, and the logged area is either replanted with different forest tree species, or forest plantation species



The SoNC 2025 Symposium featured over 60 speakers from academic institutions, conservation NGOs, government agencies, and grassroots organisations. Neutrality and scientific credibility are cornerstones of the Symposium, which highlighted the gaps in environmental management in Malaysia and provided recommendations for addressing them.



Many of Malaysia's charismatic megafauna, such as the Malayan Tapir, require support on many fronts to facilitate a rebound in its population. Initiatives such as wildlife sanctuaries, viaducts, and food banks are examples of ongoing action to conserve this keystone species.

Facing page, above: A mosaic of various agrocommodities plantations can be found on the fringes of Malaysia's forested landscapes. While economic development needs to encroach into the pristine interior regions, it should not be detrimental to the people and degrade the environment in the long term.

Facing page, below: The Bushy-crested Hornbill is colloquially known as the farmer of the forest. It consumes fruits from a variety of floral species and disperse the seeds far and wide across their home range. Many other birds and herbivores share this ecological function and are essential to the continued growth and health of Malaysia's forests.

(both native and foreign), or converted into agrocommodity plantation (rubber or oil palm). The loss of this habitat threatens its natural status along with its rich refuge harbouring the wild orchids, ferns, palms, gingers and fungi that thrive in pristine environments.

Key habitats such as mangroves, peat swamps, limestone or karst forests, and seagrass meadows are similarly facing declines in both acreage and distribution. The diversity of habitats found in Malaysia is highly dependent on and integral for the adaptation of certain species to survive in harsh environments. The low availability of soil nutrients and moisture, unusual pH levels, or lack of suitable substrates, create conditions that may not be optimal for generalist species to grow in cer-

●●● The charismatic faunal species – that is, the Malayan Tiger, Asian Elephant, and Orang Utan – were commonly found in their large roaming areas, but the combined pressures of habitat fragmentation and degradation, human-wildlife conflict, and zoonotic diseases became key contributors to their decline.

tain areas. Instead, highly specialised and often endemic species take root and flourish in heath, limestone, and montane forests. Many species belonging to the families of Begonia and Thismia found in Malaysia are endemic and can only be found in certain microhabitats, sometimes even in just one particular forest patch or hill, rendering them even more vulnerable to habitat degradation.

High levels of endemism are also present in the faunal species of Malaysia, such as land snails, freshwater fish, herpetofauna, and



The Question and Answer session after the presentations enabled the floor to provide valuable feedback to the authors of the SoNC 2025, for them to consider alternative perspectives that could enhance their narratives.



The former Minister for Natural Resources and Environmental Sustainability, Nik Nazmi Nik Ahmad, spoke about environmental governance in Malaysia and the interconnected roles and responsibilities of the Federal and State Governments in stewarding Malaysia's natural environment.

invertebrates, where they may only be found in specific water bodies (rivers, lakes, and swamps) or forest patches. They also share the same threats faced by the endemic floral species – their undisturbed natural environments are increasingly invaded and converted to suit human use and need. The small mammals such as shrews, squirrels, mousedeers, and pangolins, as well as avifauna such as forest and water birds are confronting a different set of challenges and threats. Habitat fragmentation, competition for resources, and poaching pressures are the main drivers of population decline in these faunal groups.

The charismatic faunal species – that is, the Malayan Tiger, Asian Elephant, and Orang Utan – were commonly found in their large roaming areas, but the combined pressures of habitat fragmentation and degradation, human-wildlife conflict, and zoonotic diseases became key contributors to their decline. While their plight is often

captured in mainstream media stories that tug at our heartstrings, the mandate to administer the necessary action to effectively conserve these species is fragmented across various government agencies. This may not be in the best interests of the country's biodiversity.

The Indigenous Peoples (IPs) of Malaysia, who have traditional, cultural, and spiritual ties to the natural environment and its inhabitants, are marginalised and given token treatment rather than respected as rights-holders, when it comes to matters such as land rights, alternative livelihoods, and participatory conservation. While there are some native customary land accorded to IPs around Malaysia, many more ancestral lands remain unrecognised by the government, and are frequently demarcated for development instead. The IPs have to resort to legal disputes to regain their ancestral lands, or they are forced to abandon their ancestral lands and resettle elsewhere.

The practice of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) are done *mala fide* (in bad faith), or are poorly understood and implemented. Misinterpretation or mistranslation of IP statements, and selective consultation are examples of underhanded tactics to obtain the “consent” of IPs to proposals, where the truth is only revealed after adverse impacts are apparent. The loss of attachment and cultural ties to the land and their past may result in the waning of IPs. Their traditional and cultural identities, as well as traditional ecological knowledge

may become extinct over the span of several generations.

The impact of unabated exploitation, extraction, and consumption by humankind on our natural environment has been partially highlighted in the preceding paragraphs. However, one highly pertinent issue that was raised by many Speakers at the SoNC 2025 Symposium is environmental fragmentation and degradation, occurring in both land- and sea-scapes. A healthy and interconnected natural environment is not just a place for biodiversity

●●● A highly pertinent issue that was raised by many Speakers at the Symposium is environmental fragmentation and degradation, occurring in both land- and sea-scapes.



A peat canal separates a peat swamp forest from oil palm plantations and paddy fields. Peat swamps host unique floral and faunal species that have evolved to survive in this water-logged and nutrient-poor environment. Peat swamps are incredible carbon sinks that play an outsized role in regulating our climate.

to thrive, it also enables the provisioning of ecosystem services. The supply of clean air and water, the cooling of our ambient surface temperatures, the pollination of our food crops, and detention and gradual release of rainwater into waterways, are examples of ecosystem services provided by the natural environment, without which our wellbeing and comfort will be greatly imperilled.

When environmental fragmentation and degradation exceeds a certain threshold, nature’s resilience to outside pressures and ability to provide ecosystem services drastically drops, increasing the likelihood of system failure.

This narrative may paint a grim and gloomy picture of the state of nature conservation in Malaysia, but it is a necessary step for moving forward. We must objectively and clearly assess the baseline conditions and environmental management gaps, as well as the efficacy of current interventions. It is our fervent hope that SoNC 2025 will become the reference material for government agencies, policymakers and lawmakers to better conserve and manage Malaysia’s natural environment. 🌳




Mangrove ecosystems are a source of income to artisanal fisherfolk, contribute to the nation’s food security, and mitigate the effects of coastline erosion and rising sea levels.

Ng Sean Fong is a Data & Policy Officer for the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS). He is pursuing an MSc in Environmental Science at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, where he is reviewing the ecological input in environmental impact assessments for oil palm plantation projects.

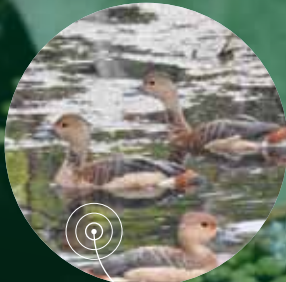
RECONNECT

MARINA GROVE


Nature in the City,
a City in Nature



Locally vulnerable, the **Yellow Bittern** (*Ixobrychus sinensis*) is both a resident and a migratory species in Singapore. It prefers the well-vegetated edges of ponds and freshwater marshes, and this one is patiently waiting for the chance to stab any unsuspecting prey that strays near it.



Usually found in ponds and marshes, **Lesser Whistling Ducks** (*Dendrocygna javanica*) and their young are ekeing out a precarious existence on transient land.



An unassuming pond tucked away in a tiny corner of Singapore's financial district has become a magnet for both resident and migratory birds, making Marina Grove an example of how nature can thrive even in a heavily built-up city.

Little Grebes (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) are highly localised residents of freshwater ponds.

A common resident, the **Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot** (*Loriculus galgulus*) thrives on the forest edge, but it has also adapted well to the marshy habitat in Marina Grove.

Text and Photos by
ALFRED CHIA

Oriental Reed Warblers (*Acrocephalus orientalis*) are widespread throughout Singapore. They typically inhabit grassland and vegetation on the fringes of freshwater ponds, not unlike what can be found in Marina Grove.

A rare migrant to Singapore, the **Baillon's Crane** (*Zapornia pusilla*) travels to Southeast Asia to escape the harsh winters of its home range in Siberia and China. It is a shy species that rarely leaves the cover of vegetation near ponds and marshes.



In a quiet corner

of Marina South, not far from the gleaming skyscrapers of the Marina Bay Financial Centre and the space-age domes of the Gardens By The Bay, sits a small grassy field strewn with pebbles, gravel and rocks. On one side of the field lies a pond. This is Marina Grove. It is not very pretty — quite untidy in fact — but that hardly matters to the variety of birds that are drawn to it.

At least 15 species of resident and migratory birds of conservation significance have been spotted at this temporary refuge, along with locally endangered species like the Lesser Whistling Duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*), and locally critically endangered species like the Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*).

Welcome to nature; nature in an area that is absolutely urban; nature that needs minimal or no human intervention. An ultimate example of what a City in Nature can look like. 🌿



The **Blue-tailed Bee-eater** (*Merops philippinus*) can be seen on the exposed branches of the trees near Marina Grove. The species is widespread throughout Singapore during the winter months.



The **Savanna Nightjar** (*Aprimulgus affinis*), as its name suggests, is a nocturnal bird that is very well-camouflaged and extremely hard to spot among the leaf litter, where it sleeps during the day.

Shining a Spotlight on Our Volunteers

Our volunteers and members are at the heart of our outreach and conservation efforts, devoting their time and energy towards the building of a robust nature community, and safeguarding Singapore's natural heritage. We feature two long-time NSS members who have made immense contributions over the years.

Text by **TR SAMMYUKTA**

Alfred Chia

An Advocate for Habitats and Species

It may be a moment from more than 30 years ago, but Mr Alfred Chia still vividly remembers the day he fell in love with one of his favourite birds: the Blue-tailed Bee-eater. It was in 1989, and he was travelling along a winding stretch of Jalan Ulu Sembawang, which passed through farmland,

open countryside, and rural communities. “And it was there, one day, that I spotted the beautiful bird perched on a dead tree stump.”

Mr Chia was hooked and till this day, he takes pleasure in birding solo. He has been a dedicated member and volunteer for Nature Society Singapore (NSS) for at least

Mr Chia believes that photographers like him could go beyond their passion for capturing and documenting wildlife, by taking steps to save the species' habitats.

Mr Alfred Chia has been an NSS member and volunteer for at least 35 years.



35 years, and he currently serves as the Co-Chair of the Straw-headed Bulbul Working Group established in 2021. He helps coordinate the tasks of the committee's four sub-groups, to ensure the responsible implementation of the Species Action Plan.

Mr Chia's greatest wish is for more people to be aware of the importance of habitat conservation. He believes that photographers like him could go beyond their passion for capturing and documenting wildlife, by taking steps to save the species' habitats.

He also hopes that, where the government is concerned, it could “periodically take the bold step of conserving habitats that have been proven to be worth conserving”, regardless of whether the land has been earmarked for development. Such habitats include Marina Grove, nestled in a corner of Singapore's financial district.

“It's only when you protect and keep habitats that their natural inhabitants like plants, trees, birds, animals and insects would continue to thrive,” he said. 🌿



Mr Lim Kim Chuah has been participating in NSS' activities for nearly 50 years.

“I hope that NSS will remain one of the staunchest advocates of nature in Singapore and regionally.”

Bulbul Working Group, with the primary goal of bringing together peers who shared the same commitment to raise awareness and protect the critically endangered species.

Mr Lim's passion for birding has also taken him beyond Singapore's shores. He contributed several articles about Pantii, a premier birding location in Johor that is renowned for its lowland rainforest species like the Great Argus, the Wrinkled Hornbill, and the Malaysian Rail-babbler.

He hopes that such information would enhance and improve habitat preservation in the region, and encourage future birdwatchers to stay curious and explore. 🌿

Lim Kim Chuah

A Witness of Local Birding History

A former chairman of the NSS Bird Group, Mr Lim Kim Chuah's journey with NSS spans nearly 50 years, and it's marked by his unwavering dedication and love for nature.

This abiding love was sparked during a trip to Senoko led by ex-NSS president, Professor Ng Soon Chye. Mr Lim got to observe migratory shorebirds and even an osprey hunting in a pond and, since then, he had been avidly interested in birding, and tireless in his contributions to local conservation.

One of the most unforgettable experiences in Mr Lim's nature journey was his participation in the inaugural Singapore Bird Race in 1984. He fondly recalls spending the day discovering new places for spotting unique birds. He witnessed history in the making, and he could not have anticipated how the competition would become one of the longest-running events of its kind in the region, with the 41st edition held in November 2025.

In 2021, Mr Lim joined the then newly formed Straw-Headed



Mr Lim Kim Chuah (third from left) with fellow participants of the inaugural Singapore Bird Race in 1984 (from left) Mr David Bradford, Mr Clive Briffett, Mr Lim Kim Seng, Ms Sandra Sabapathy, and Mr Hugh Buck. Photo: The Straits Times

Snapshots of Past NSS Events



Once Upon Our Coast

4 OCT 2025

NSS President Leong Kwok Peng revisited fond memories of Singapore's old coastlines, once lined with fishing villages, kelongs, and prawn ponds. NSS member Tony O'Dempsey also presented the Nature Society's conservation-based proposal for the Long Island reclamation plan. Photo: Tony O'Dempsey



Butterfly Walk at Woodlands Botanical Gardens

5 Oct 2025

This was a special walk organised as a part of the Asia Nature Challenge, a continent-wide initiative encouraging people across Asia to observe and document nature and wildlife in their local areas using the iNaturalist platform. Participants spotted 16 species of butterflies. Photo: Mohamed Jusri Bangi



Birdwatching at Kranji Marshes

12 Oct 2025

A total of 17 people braved a light drizzle in the morning, and were rewarded with sightings of at least 41 species, including a Grey-headed Fish Eagle, four species of kingfishers, and the Red-wattled Lapwing. Photo: Yap Wee Jin



Join us!

We organise a variety of events that are open to NSS members and the public, from educational talks to birdwatching and rewilding activities. You can go to nss.org.sg/events for more information.



Basic Plant ID at Bidadari Park

18 OCT 2025

Participants were taught the basics of plant identification. They learnt to recognise plants by looking at their stems, leaves, flowers and fruit.
Photo: Lena Chow

SBR x Leica Conversation with Wayne Chng

6 Nov 2025

In the run-up to the 41st Singapore Bird Race, wildlife photographer Wayne Chng shared the stories behind his images. Participants also got to try out the Leica SL camera system. Photo: Shreeya Subra



Heritage Tree Walk at Fort Canning

7 DEC 2025

Participants learnt about the history of the Fort Canning Park. They were brought to heritage places like the Keramat Iskandar Shah and the Forbidden Spring historical garden. Photo: Li Minyi



Young Naturalists' Exploratory Walk at Bidadari Park

19 DEC 2025

Guides Tan Beng Chiak (centre) and Norlinda Ishnin (right) from the NSS Education Committee led a group of young people (and the young at heart) around the park, where they spotted the Finlayson's Squirrel, a Common Kingfisher, the Oriental Dollarbird, and the Collared Kingfisher. Photo: Sung Mei Yee

Snapshots of Past NSS Events (Con't)



Making Conservation More Effective Through AI

14 JAN 2026

Professor William Sutherland explained the importance of data in protecting the planet's biodiversity. Prof Sutherland, who teaches conservation biology at Cambridge University, also talked about how AI can undermine science by creating false information, and discussed strategies for reducing such risks. Photo: Shreeyaa Subra



Plant Painting at the Singapore Botanic Gardens

17 JAN 2026

NSS Plant Group members Sng Bee Bee and Jayasree Alamuru showed participants how to sketch and paint plants by observing and remembering the key features of different species. Photo: Jayasree Alamuru



Nature Walk at Thomson Nature Park

8 FEB 2026

NSS Exco member Goh Si Guim (second from right) showed participants around the small nature park that conceals an abandoned kampung. It is an example of how quickly nature can reclaim the land when given enough time and space. Photo: Lee Kwang Boon



Flower Walk at Bukit Batok Nature Park

14 FEB 2026

On Valentine's day, participants were brought around the nature park by NSS volunteer Intan Krishanty (centre), who also talked about the role of flowers and plants in our history and culture. Photo: Shreeyaa Subra



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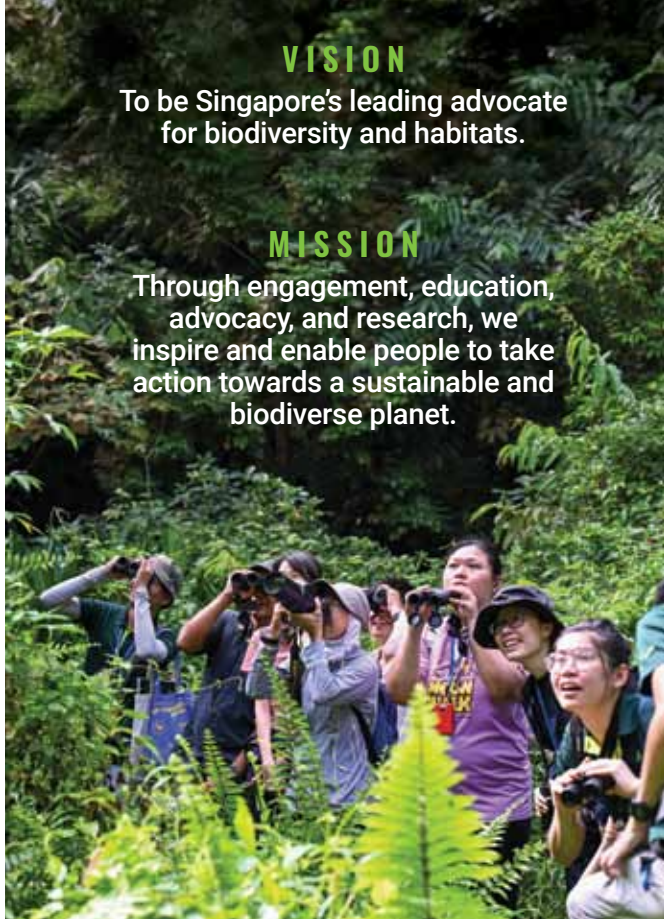
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VISION

To be Singapore's leading advocate for biodiversity and habitats.

MISSION

Through engagement, education, advocacy, and research, we inspire and enable people to take action towards a sustainable and biodiverse planet.



Why Join NSS?

We organise guided walks, nature surveys, clean-ups, talks, exhibitions, and overseas nature trips. To find out more, scan the QR code to download the NSS Programme Catalogue.



Introducing Friends of NSS

We are excited to launch Friends of NSS, a free account with NSS to take part in our activities.

From March 2026, an NSS account (as a Friend of NSS or NSS Member) will be required to register for activities listed on our Events and Calendar page on the NSS website (nss.org.sg/events/).

We encourage all individuals who are interested in joining NSS activities to create a **free Friends of NSS account** ahead of time, for a smoother registration experience.

To find out more and sign up, go to:
nss.org.sg/join-us/

NSS Membership Categories

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION

- S\$40 Ordinary Member**
Age 18 and above
- S\$75 Family Member**
Husband, Wife & Children under Age 18
- S\$18 Junior & Student Members**
Age 12-18 & Full-time Students Age 18-35 enrolled in a Singapore-based institution
- S\$1,000 Life Member**
Applicable to Ordinary Members who have joined for 10 years or more
- S\$200 Affiliate Member**
Non-Profit Organisations & Schools
- S\$4,000 Corporate Member**
Nominal Fee of S\$200 + Annual Tax-Exempt Donation of S\$3,800

FAQs about NSS Membership

Can I use a physical form to sign up as an NSS Member or Friend of NSS?

We no longer accept physical membership forms. All NSS memberships and Friends of NSS registrations are conducted online to ensure secure record-keeping.

Can I be an NSS member but not have an NSS account?

Yes, you can remain an NSS Member without creating an NSS account on our website (nss.org.sg). However, you will not be able to register for NSS events and activities.

Can I pay for NSS membership in cash?

We no longer accept cash payments. All membership payments must be made through available online payment methods.

I wish to donate to NSS when I renew my membership. How do I do so?

Donations can be made via the donation page on the NSS website (nss.org.sg/donation/).

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