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# 'Useless' wastelands turn up wealth of animal life

**NUS don is featured in top science journal for his pioneering work in unearthing new species in habitats dismissed as barren**

By **Chang Ai-Lien**

A WELL-KNOWN scientist here, famous for his passionate views on conservation, has been highlighted in one of the world's top scientific publications for his work in the field.

Associate Professor Peter Ng was recently singled out by the journal Nature for his ground-breaking work that has uncovered a wealth of animal life in habitats long neglected and dismissed as barren by the mainstream scientific community.

'People always want to go to the sexy habitats, the rainforests, the coral reefs.

'I've always liked the underdog, so I throw a boomerang in the works and go to places which may look nasty, but could be hiding something rich.'

This means that the 44-year-old from the National University of Singapore's (NUS) biological sciences department has often been up to his armpits in the acidic, tea-coloured, muck-covered peat swamps of Malaysia.



**Treasure in peat swamps: A/P Peter Ng (above, at the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research) and his team have found 80 new species of fish in the peat swamps of South-east Asia.**



**The Bintan Licorice Goramy was discovered by Prof Ng and fish expert Dr Maurice Kottelat in Pulau Bintan in 2000.**

And he has turned away from rainbow-hued tropical reefs in favour of seabeds strewn with bleached-white coral rubble.

'Once you're prepared to do the dirty work, life will appear,' he said.

And his treasure trove has been immense.

Beneath the stinging, acidic waters of South-east Asia's peat swamps, for example, Prof Ng's team has uncovered 80 new species of fish, bringing the total estimate in this region to between 200 and

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'This is virtually unheard of in better-studied habitats, and this is why I've been combing these areas for 15 years,' said Prof Ng, who is also director of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research at NUS.

'It's that feeling I get when I find an animal that is not only new to the scientific world, but also so strange that it gets my blood flowing.

'It's like finding the holy grail. Then you ask yourself what else is out there.'

Beneath the coral graveyards in the shallow waters off Guam, the crab specialist has also been part of a group which unearthed an alien world where these crustaceans - long-limbed, almost colourless, half-blind - resemble their cousins found in the deep or far within caves.

'When you see creatures like this living virtually at your doorstep, your perception of the world changes.'

In Singapore, Prof Ng and his team have found that a quarter of the species of fish, crabs and shrimp are found only in freshwater swamps.

'But you discover this only if you're prepared to jump into icy, chest-high water in the middle of the night when many of them are active.'

Over the years, he has managed to rope in dozens of students and a handful of 'long-suffering' friends and colleagues to help study this diversity.

His landmark work has often been selected for top journals, including research last year that sounded the alarm on the grave state of the region's biodiversity.

It predicted the loss of up to 42 per cent of animal populations in South-east Asia by the end of the century.

So, Prof Ng and his team are racing to catalogue the huge diversity of life in the region before it is wiped out by the relentless large-scale habitat destruction for agriculture and urban development.

His work is also tinged with sadness, he said, as his is often a lone voice against the relentless pace of modernisation.

'I hope that my work will paint a more complete picture of the diversity of animal life, so that conservation efforts can take these areas into account,' he said.

'Perhaps, in a small way, this research will change the perception of what has often been described as useless wasteland, and make people think twice before destroying it.

'At the very least, the excuse 'species poor' will no longer be a valid one.'

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