



Singapore's birdman

Researcher honoured for extinction alarm

By **Chang Ai-Lien**

GROUND-BREAKING work which revealed the dire consequences of the disappearing habitats of wildlife here and in the region has helped win a National University of Singapore don kudos from the university.

Associate Professor Navjot Sodhi was a key member of the team which discovered that Singapore has lost about half its animal species in the last 200 years, and that the same is about to happen in the rest of the region.

The predictions made by the researchers - from NUS and Northern Territory University, Australia - after a detailed documentation of the state of mammals, birds, fish and butterflies on the island, were published in the prestigious journal Nature last year.

Their work stressed the need for large-scale conservation efforts to try to slow the rates of extinction. This has been highlighted by the United Nations as a critical issue on its website.

By looking at the extensive loss of wildlife habitats in Singapore and the current rate at which forests in the region are being felled, the report predicted that up to 42 per cent of South-east Asia's animal populations will have been lost by the end of this century.

'If you look at deforestation around the world, the tropics are particularly affected because there's such high biodiversity there, as well as species that are found in certain pockets, but nowhere else,' said Prof Sodhi.

Ironically, this is also the region where forests are being cleared at the world's fastest rates. About 0.9 per cent are cleared annually in South-east Asia.

In South America and Africa, where tropical forests are also being cleared at fast rates, they are disappearing at a rate of 0.4 per cent a year.

While the research has raised awareness about the problem, implementing effective conservation methods will not be easy, he added.

'These are complicated issues and conservation efforts have to be balanced with how to combat poverty and other problems faced by these countries.'

Prof Sodhi, who is from the university's biological sciences department, is a bird expert who has travelled the region studying the effects of forest loss on birds in South-east Asia and avian extinction from tropical forests.

The 42-year-old researcher, who has had 65 papers published in major international scientific journals, is now writing a book on the plight of animals and plants in the region. It is due to be published by the Cambridge University Press next year.

He was awarded the NUS Outstanding Research award last month.

The other recipient of the award was Assistant Professor Wong Tien Yin, associate director of the Singapore Eye Research Institute.

He used computer-imaging of the eye to determine the correlation between damaged retinal blood vessels and the risks of cardiovascular failure.

Rapid loss

SINGAPORE has lost about half its animal species in the last 200 years, and



Keeping a close watch, bird expert Navjot Sodhi has travelled the region studying the effects of forest loss on birds and avian extinction.

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the same is about to happen in the rest of the region, says Prof Sodhi and his team.

The researchers made a detailed study of the state of mammals, birds, fish and butterflies on the island before making the prediction.

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