

MUSINGS ON SINGAPORE'S NATURAL HISTORY
WITH PROFESSOR PETER NG
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Director of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR), National University of Singapore, Professor Peter Ng also heads the Systematics and Ecology Laboratory at the Department of Biological Sciences, Faculty of Science, NUS. An international authority in the biodiversity of crabs and fishes, he has also conducted research into the ecology of peat swamps, conservation biology in Southeast Asia and museology. He is also charged with the moving of the present Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research from its present location in the science faculty to a new \$30 million building that will serve as a fully fledged Natural History Museum offering free admission to the public.

Q: HOW DID YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL INTEREST IN SINGAPORE'S NATURAL HERITAGE BEGIN?

Professor Ng: Since I was in primary school – I loved animals as a hobby – kept all sorts of fish, loved bird watching and pottering around the seashore. It stayed.

Q: WHY DOES SINGAPORE NEED A NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM? HOW DIFFERENT WOULD IT BE FROM THE NATURAL HISTORY GALLERIES OF THE FORMER RAFFLES MUSEUM AT STAMFORD ROAD?

Professor Ng: Because we are no longer a third world country that cannot afford the educational value and heritage value of such a museum. People need to connect with the past – and that includes natural heritage. There has been much said about culture, arts and architecture. I am of the opinion that this must include nature. The world has changed. As has our heritage. We need to tell people – show people – show citizens what we had, lost and are now trying hard to keep.

How will the natural history museum be different? Only in content, because the world has changed, and presentation, as there is now greater style and improved technology. The message remains the same – natural heritage and the natural environment must be conserved. It will showcase the Singapore model in many ways. Not because we are the best – we are still some way off – but how we have lived our history, achieved first world status, and paid a price for it in many ways – heritage included. We are now trying, as always, to do a balancing act between economic and social well being and environmental challenges. We are good at balancing and trying to mitigate.

Q: WHAT MAKES THE COLLECTION OF THE RMBR SIGNIFICANT TO BIOLOGISTS AS WELL AS THE PUBLIC AND POLICY MAKERS?

Professor Ng: It is Singapore (and Malaysia)'s history in a nutshell. It represents 150 years of our history of living on this island. What was here – what we used to do, what Singapore was like. We need this history to bond a people that has come from a multitude of nations and cultures. Short of sounding

like a politician, I am of the belief that people who do not know their history, including natural history, cannot really appreciate what it is to be a Singaporean. That includes what we have lost, the mistakes we have made as a nation, and what we are now doing to change things. In this new world, we – Singaporeans – need to walk the talk!

Q: COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT SOME OF THE SPECIMENS FROM THE RMBR COLLECTION THAT YOU ARE PARTICULARLY FOND OF? ARE THERE RECENT ADDITIONS TO THE COLLECTION THAT YOU BELIEVE WILL PROVE VITAL TO FUTURE RESEARCHERS?

Professor Ng: I am biased towards my crabs – so that is hard. All the material that comes into the collection, especially from researchers and public from Singapore, is important – we are after all the national repository for animal specimens. These specimens of all types will tell future generations what was here and what researchers did. We also have growing holdings of Southeast Asian specimens – that is important for researchers who need to see the region as a whole. Singapore endeavours to be a portal for the region. We are well positioned – both geographically and economically. It's the same for biodiversity research.

Q: COULD YOU UPDATE US ON THE PROGRESS OF THE PLANS FOR THE NEW NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM?

Professor Ng: Fund raising is now reaching its end-phase – we need to wrap it up, get the outstanding funding needed and get the new museum building up and running soon.

Q: WHAT WOULD IT TAKE FOR A NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM TO BE EFFECTIVE FROM A PUBLIC OUTREACH AND EDUCATION PERSPECTIVE?

Professor Ng: A new larger gallery would be a good start. We have good educational programmes that can be substantially enlarged and expanded in the future. We have a host of new ideas and plans for expanding the museum's role in tertiary and school environmental education in the years ahead – but it is too early to tell you about them now. Suffice to say – watch this space.



Q: WHY SHOULD SINGAPOREANS CARE ABOUT OUR NATURAL HERITAGE, BOTH WHAT USED TO EXIST AS WELL AS WHAT REMAINS?

Professor Ng: Well, it is a matter of soul. They need not care or worry about the past and what has been lost. But if the people of today – young and old – really could not be bothered and only worry about the 5Cs and wealth, then as a people, we are extremely uncivilised. There is much more to being human than just material wealth. Great cities and civilisations need their people to have not only economic and military smarts but also a philosophical one – and to bond with nature. I think Singaporeans will rise to this challenge; I have met enough young people to believe that this is the way ahead. Know the past, understand the present – only then can you chart your future. Winston Churchill once said that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it.

Q: YOU TEACH A MODULE ON THE NATURAL HERITAGE OF SINGAPORE. DO YOU THINK THE MODULE HAS A REAL IMPACT ON THE STUDENTS?

Professor Ng: I am sure it has. The module has evolved and is now very popular with NUS students. It is interesting because we are taking the natural history and conservation message to a wider audience and they are getting excellent exposure. The first thing, as always, is for people to know what is out there. Once they know, then their common sense will take over.

Q: THE FUTURE OF NATURE IN SINGAPORE IS OFTEN CAST IN GLOOM AND DOOM TERMS. ARE THERE ANY SIGNS LATELY THAT SINGAPORE'S NATURAL HISTORY COULD HAVE A FUTURE?

Professor Ng: I am a pessimist by nature – so I am well placed to answer this. After seeing how the conservation scene here has evolved for the last 25 years, I can in all honesty say things are getting so much better. We have gone beyond pure pragmatism into a new belief that we can change things. The landscape has become better – the policies have improved and our leaders are listening and believing.

Many young people – including some of my students – lament on how bad things are or how slow policies are. Yes – things can go faster and things can be better. But we have in 25-30 years moved in leaps and bounds! Things were much worse and more depressing 25 years ago. The future for our natural history is actually pretty good looking forward into the next 2-3 decades. Can I see further? No – and I have no intention. Anything longer than a generation is hard to imagine. If things go well in the generation ahead, I would be happy – and it would bode well for the next.