

TALES FROM THE CRYPT

The Legacy of Pulau Seringat

July 1997 – as of the first light of dawn lit up the shoreline of Singapore's southern islands, the golden rays revealed a living, thriving reef amidst a peaceful sea. But the small team from the National University of



Singapore that landed on the reef was there for a grim business - salvage collection!

These last witnesses of this living reef would collect, record and preserve as many specimens as physically possible before it was finally lost to land reclamation.

The reef revealed rather surprising finds - numerous Neptune cups, cushions stars, giant

sea clams, crabs, octopus, fish, seastars and colourful corals including spectacularly red sea fans, still submerged by fast currents. These specimens are now on display in the Public Gallery of the Raffles Museum - the labels that accompany each specimen reveal the collection location and date. The larger part of the Pulau Seringat collection is carefully kept in the reference collection where it can be accessed by researchers.

It was a sobering to realize then that besides the small salvage team, very few Singaporeans would be able to appreciate and remember the reef. While some loss of natural habitats has been inevitable, Singaporeans were losing important parts of their natural heritage before they could even witness and remember it. Pulau Seringat was eventually merged with Lazarus Island under the plan to develop a marine village resort, boat landing facilities and beach areas for recreation.



Few people realize this, but when reclamation loomed at Chek Jawa four years later, it was the Seringat experience that prompted the initiation of large scale public walks by the Raffles Museum after the salvage surveys were complete. This encouraged thousands of people "A Last Chance to See" and a dedicated webpage (<http://chekjawa.nus.edu.sg>) documented hundreds of digital photos of animals, plants, topography, visitor experiences, guidesheets and articles, to share the the heritage of the place with even more people.

In December 2001, at the eleventh hour, Chek Jawa was granted a 10-year reprieve from reclamation.

Picture captions: 1. Giant clam (preserved) 2. Red-eye reefcrab (Eriphia smithi) 3. Frogfish (Lophiocharon trisignatus) 4. A living Giant Clam (Tridacna squamosa) 5. A living Neptune's Cup (Petrosia sp.) 6. Neptune's Cup (preserved)

The 1986 Stranding of a Black Marlin off East Coast Park



On Sunday 23rd November 1986, museum curator Mr K. L. Yeo received a call about a 3.3 metre long Black Marlin (*Makaira indica*) stranded on East Coast beach. This was a rare event as the fish is usually found in deep-water coastlines and around oceanic islands. The shallow waters off Singapore are an unlikely place for this fish and it was considered a stray, much like the Siglap Leatherback turtle of 1883 and the whale shark believed to have been reported in the 1960's.

It was reportedly in good condition so Mr Yeo set out for the old Joo Chiat Police Station. After examining the specimen, the police agreed to ferry the large fish to the museum to be stored in the large walk-in cold room.

A company was found to taxidermise the specimen and the fish was skinned and a cast was made from its body. The skin was draped around the cast and reassembled. When it was returned to the museum, the marlin was mounted prominently just above the narrow stairwell that leads down to the wet collection. Spotlights lit up the specimen and

the rare visitor (this was well before the Public Gallery was created) was amazed at the size of the fish, and even that it was real!

The creature originally weighed some 245kg, which is light if you consider that the tropical waters species can weigh up to 700kg. Though the cast was stuffed with straw, it looks very heavy. Researchers walking down the very narrow flight of stairs to the Wet Collection can't but help feel nervous at the sight of the heavy-looking Black Marlin suspended on the wall above them!

This specimen will be displayed in the Public Gallery in November 2005