

# Diminishing Space

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## Introduction

It is very difficult to be a small country like Singapore. Being one of the smallest independent nations and having about the third highest population density in the world, the country is constantly faced with many problems related to land-scarcity. Reclamation of its coastal areas has therefore always been seen and popularly accepted as a necessity for the nation's survival and prosperity. Over the years, the reclamation has no doubt had tremendous impact on the natural environment.

For example, in 1819 when Raffles first landed on the island, it was estimated that 13% of Singapore was covered with mangroves. Not many parts of Singapore's coastline then were without mangroves. But now, mangrove areas cover only 0.5% of the total land area of Singapore. The destruction of mangroves and other types of natural areas in Singapore have always been attributed to the need for development.

Indeed, when Singapore was forced into complete sovereignty on August 1965, the new government took aggressive action to ensure the young country's economic viability. This meant that many natural areas had to be destroyed to build industrial infrastructure and proper housing for its workforce to attract foreign firms and create jobs for its rapidly increasing population. Today the island republic is one of the wealthiest countries in the world and its citizens generally enjoy a relatively high standard of living.

This standard of living can be attributed to the republic constant vigilance in monitoring and studying changes in the global and regional economic climate. It comes to no surprise, therefore how it has always been able to respond to such changes rapidly to ensure its relevance in the global economy so as to maximize its share of the benefits to be reaped from the global capitol flow. One such move, recently planned with the hope to do just this, is to build a luxury residential resort in the Southern Islands which might include a casino to attract high rollers and rich property buyers.

If the plan comes to be a reality, what implications will it have on Singaporeans? No doubt, theoretically a casino can help boost Singapore's economy, attract foreign capital flow and create jobs. Thus it can be seen from an economic point of view, as an efficient use of space. But what are the implications a diminishing natural environment will have on Singapore and her citizens? Is economic well being all that defines progress? Must the natural environment always be sacrificed for economic growth?

## Our Natural Heritage

It might perhaps escape the imagination of an ordinary urbanite that the Republic of Singapore actually consists of many islands and not just one. Most of these islands are small and situated south of the main island. These include Pulau Hantu, Sisters Islands, Lazarus Island, and many more.

Indeed, these islands can be considered to be well kept secrets of the nation. Not many citizens are really aware of them save some adventure seekers, nature enthusiasts and the boatmen that these two groups normally hire to ferry them there. But what is there to see at the Southern Islands?

Not known to many, the waters surrounding the Southern Islands house a good deal of beautiful corals. These corals in turn allow a variety of living organisms to survive and therefore form a natural habitat for a huge number of animal species. The biodiversity that dwells within these habitats is very impressive indeed.

Consider this: The Great Barrier Reef's 350,000 square kilometers of reefs has about 500 species of corals. Singapore's mere 54 square kilometers, has close to 200 species of corals from 55 genera. In other words, even though our reef size is only a tiny percentage of the Great Barrier Reef, we have almost half of the species of corals. According to a web site by the Reef Ecology Study Team of the National University of Singapore, our reefs sustain a good diversity of other marine organisms too, such as *gorgonians* and *nudibranchs*. The team also pointed out the existence of 111 reef fish species from 30 families.

Reclamation and construction works to build urban infrastructures could diminish or even destroy this biodiversity. Sedimentation can cause major reef degradation. Reclamation and construction works can increase the sediment load and this can in turn either smother the live corals or reduce the penetration of sunlight in these waters. Sunlight is crucial for corals to survive. Without sunlight the corals cannot grow and as they thin out, so will the other animals that call them home.

### **Seeing the Sunlight**

Just like corals need sunlight to survive, perhaps land-scarce Singapore too finds it a need to sacrifice her natural areas to survive. But how land-scarce is the country truly? Today, land-scarce Singapore has at least 23 golf courses and three driving ranges. Together, they take up about 1400 hectares. Some of these golf courses are in prime areas while some others are on reclaimed lands.

It is true perhaps that in order to make Singapore an attractive place to live, work and play, there is a need to provide a wide array of recreational and sporting activities. But if a huge part of Singapore, about the size of three Yishun New Towns can be sacrificed for an elite minority, perhaps it is time to consider saving just the 54 square kilometers of corals for the future generations of Singaporeans to enjoy. Perhaps ideas, like intergenerational equity, have been sidelined for too long.

Granted, that given the geographical position of the country and the political history and landscape of the region, it is unwise to allow passion for the environment to dictate the most appropriate course of action. But likewise, the need to gain only material well being should also not color our idea of development. Is development only synonymous to material gain? Shouldn't emotional attachment and a sense of belonging too be part of the plan to develop and build a nation?

### **Progressive Nation**

The fact that the biodiversity-rich Tanjong Chek Jawa was granted a ten-year deferment from reclamation works shows some very important points. Firstly, it proves that nature-consciousness is

on the rise in Singapore. A coral reef can be a very useful nation-building tool by using it to instill a stronger sense of attachment to the country, in a nation that is becoming greener. With the Singapore's Government pushing for Life Sciences in its school syllabus and the desire to make the island an educational hub for the region, a coral reef's potential, as an edu-tourism destination for example, should also be explored.

Secondly, the Tanjong Chek Jawa's deferment showed that Singapore, contrary to how it is popularly perceived by foreigners, has a serious democratic government. By listening to the public's plea to save Tanjong Chek Jawa, even if it is just temporarily, it signaled its seriousness in promoting a progressive national system by rewarding active citizenry and encouraging feedback. But active citizenry does not come automatically. Feedback only comes when individual citizens sincerely care enough for issues of the nation to voice his or her concern.

### **Problem-free Spirituality?**

Members of the Muslim community in Singapore are generally silent when it comes to issues of the environment for reasons yet to be studied. Compare the attendance of Muslims in spiritual seminars and *majlis dzikir*s with those of reforestation activities and habitat surveys. Perhaps some might point out that it is only right that the religious concentrate on the spiritual aspects of religion. But how should religious and spiritual people respond to the threat of habitat destruction?

Asghar Ali Engineer once wrote: "Thus the real spirituality lies in serving the people, in fact serving the whole creation. Therefore, even the act to protect environment from destruction is also a spiritual act. It is only in proper environment that life - whether human, animal or plant life - can thrive."

But more importantly, conservation issues in Singapore have to address the social and cultural landscape, as well as potential tourism development. The threat to the last few remaining sanctuaries for wildlife can only be diffused if the public is educated of the importance of such ecosystems to our own while encouraging active citizenry. Ignoring the human and economic dimension by focusing only on the biological and religious aspects may prove counter productive.

### **Conclusion**

The corals of the Southern Islands are a good example of how a physical space can be contested by many needs, be it economic, ecological, social or even spiritual. To concentrate on any one of these needs while totally ignoring the others in our deliberations is at best, unwise. But being unwilling to deliberate on issues such as these – issues that affects all Singaporeans both directly and indirectly – is even worse.

This is especially so when the unwilling, more often than not, willingly call themselves Vicegerents of the Planet.

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