

## Nature Society (Singapore)

### NSS's Response to Internet Comments on the Projects of its Conservation Committee: A Review of the Facts

*The views expressed below are endorsed by the following:*

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#### Introduction

Nature Society (Singapore) [NSS] members have been disturbed by statements made in certain blogs and websites that they feel are inaccurate or misrepresent the work of the Society and in particular its Conservation Committee both in the Malayan Nature Society (Singapore Branch) as well as in its emergence as the NSS after 1991. These comments are made in articles posted in Bird Ecology Study Group (BESG) blogs, Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research (RMBR)'s DNA website and elsewhere. We feel it is important for the good name of NSS and the work we do that we attempt to clarify and correct some of these inaccuracies by giving our version of events. What follows below is our review of these inaccurate and misleading statements and our comments on them.

#### A) Campaign Against the Lower Peirce Golf Course Project (1992)

##### Internet Comments:

1) "The almost daily media confrontation was led by Dr Wee, who was then President of NSS when the Conservation Committee Chairman declined to take up the fight as the area was not rich in birdlife." (DNA, undated)

2) "... I have requested the Chairman of the Conservation Committee Dr Ho Hua Chew to take up the cause. He declined. As a diehard birdwatcher he was probably interested in areas where the birdlife was visually as well as audibly obvious --- like Kranji Heronry, Sungei Buloh or Khatib Bongsu." (BESG, 2017a)

3) "Nature Society's Conservation Committee was similarly not involved in the late 1990s when Lower Peirce forest was under threat of being cleared for a golf course. I was the Founding President of the newly formed Nature Society (Singapore) then and I sent a message to **Dr Ho Hua Chew**, Chairman of the Conservation Committee, to oppose the plan. He was not interested. So I took charge." (BESG, 2017b)

##### NSS Responses:

1) Dr Ho, with Sutari as assistant, was co-ordinator for the bird surveys under the NSS Bird Group. This was acknowledged behind the cover page of NSS's **Proposed Golf Course at**

**Lower Peirce Reservoir: an EIA report (1992).** Together with Sutari, Dr. Ho invited Dr. Wee, the then President of the Society, to visit the bird survey transects, which he agreed to do. To claim that Dr. Ho could not care less because the Peirce Reservoir Forest is not "rich in birdlife" is false. If that is true, Dr. Ho would not have, together with Sutari, persuaded and brought the then President to visit and have a look at the field of battle at all.

2) The claim that Dr. Ho declined "to take up the cause" is incorrect. What happened was that he was asked by the then President to co-ordinate/collate the results of all the surveys done by the various groups. Dr. Ho thought and told the then President that he (the President) was the best person for the task as he was a botanist and plant life was the main-stay of the nature reserve. Also, he was close at the time to the various academic collaborators.

## **B) Signature Petition Against the Lower Peirce Golf Course Project (1992)**

### **Internet Comments:**

"There was also a spontaneous signature campaign ... a campaign that was organized without the knowledge of the President" ( **BESG**, 2017a).

### **NSS Responses:**

1) The signature campaign was organised with Dr. Wee's knowledge and was not "spontaneous". In Wee and Hale, 2008, it is stated that: "A campaign was organized that resulted in many thousands signing up, giving not only their names but their identity card numbers and occupations" to oppose the construction of the golf course ... And further, in Wee & Hale 2008, it is added: "The almost daily confrontation in the media led to increasing public support against ... the golf course".

2) Dr. Wee himself had sent Dr. Ho a draft of the petition asking for his input. Dr. Ho assisted to canvass for signatures in support of the petition. The signature collection was impressive. NSS made extensive outreach to collect the signatures. It was not sent, as the Government decided to shelve the building of the golf course.

## **C) NSS's Conservation Proposals and their Aftermath**

Here are a series of the internet postings on the Conservation Committee's efforts at nature conservation:

### **Internet Comments:**

1) "Flushed with success, the Conservation Committee of the society began a series of campaigns to get government to protect the many areas listed in the Master Plan – as long as there was an abundance of birdlife. Filled with enthusiasm but lacking in behind-the-scene connections, the local leadership engaged in media confrontations when government failed to respond positively. Members were then new to conservation and more than a little naive, to say the least. Eventually every single non-gazetted area listed in the Master Plan ended up being developed." (**DNA**, undated).

2) "Eventually, every one of the other conservation proposals in the society's Master Plan was rejected and till today, Sungei Buloh is the society's first and only success in persuading the government to set aside any new area for nature conservation." (Wee & Hale, 2008)

3) "This complements the Society's earlier success, that of persuading government to set aside an area for a bird sanctuary in Sungei Buloh. Until today these are the only two

successes the Society can be proud of “ (**BESG**, 2017a)

**NSS Responses:**

1) Only two of these nature areas proposed for conservation “ended up being developed”; these are: Marina South and Senoko. The claim that there are “only two successes the Society can be proud of “(citing Sungei Buloh and the campaign against the Lower Peirce golf course) is again incorrect.

2) Here are the facts pertaining to the proposals submitted to the relevant authorities and their aftermath, stated in brief. The readers can judge the facts for themselves:

a) **Kranji Dam Mangrove** (MNS, 1987a): A proposal for its conservation was put in a small section of the Sungei Buloh proposal, formulated by the NSS Bird Group and Conservation Committee. Thanks to Clive Briffett, who identified the area as important and formulated the detailed proposal after the Buloh proposal was submitted (MNS 1987b), it was designated a Nature Area in the inaugural **Singapore Green Plan (SGP, 1993)**. And it was subsequently named the ‘Kranji Nature Trail Park’ and incorporated into the management of Sg Buloh Nature Park by National Parks (NParks). In 2015, it was officially integrated into Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, dropping its former name.

b) **Kranji Marshes** (MNS, 1985 & MNS, 1990a): The Kranji Marshes was included with five other Singapore wetland sites in the IUCN’s **Directory of Asian Wetlands**, emphasizing its ecological importance as “a fairly rare type of habitat in Singapore and the Peninsular Malaysia” (Hails, 1989). An outline proposal for the conservation of the freshwater marshland at the Kranji Reservoir was submitted as early as 1985 to the relevant authorities. An expanded and updated proposal was submitted in 1990. After the tussles with the Mediacorp Transmission Project (1990) and the Kranji Sanctuary Golf Course (2002), the remaining intact marshes, mostly south of the BBC station, were designated ‘Kranji Marshes Park’ in 2005 by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). NSS carried out an adoption programme here under the Public Utility Board’s (PUB) ABC Waters Programme from 1999 to 2014. After this, URA has, in consultation with NSS, made the Park more accessible to the public while also making it more attractive to the birdlife.

c) **Senoko** (MNS, 1990b): This bird sanctuary, a remnant mangrove area with aqua-culture ponds, was overwhelmed by the Sembawang HDB project. In response to its request to manage Senoko (NSS letter, 13 July 1992), NSS’s Conservation Committee received a reply from the Ministry of National Development (MND) stating that it had set aside 24 hectares of Senoko for conservation, but that the area boundary had not been finalised yet and they would revert back when it is done (MND letter, 6 October 1992). The Committee then requested a meeting to discuss the run of the boundary to include an important part of the habitat (NSS letter, 6 Nov 1992). The Committee was trying to do the best for the wildlife in the area, given that the authorities were not familiar with the habitat and its wildlife. In the meantime, the Committee managed to show NParks the area of concern in January 1993. While awaiting the MND’s reply, the then MND Acting Minister announced in Parliament that the Senoko bird sanctuary area will be developed for HDB upgraders.

d) **Sentosa** (MNS, 1990c): This report proposed Mount Serapong and Mount Imbiah for conservation. These two areas were put into the **Singapore Green Plan (1993)** as Nature Areas. This proposal has so far stayed the hand of Sentosa Development Corporation in its development plans from eating into Mount Serapong and, to some extent, Mount Imbiah

e) **Marina South** (MNS, 1991a): The NSS Conservation Committee's effort to save the marshy area with ponds for the wild ducks and other wetland bird species was overwhelmed by the government's land-fill to prevent mosquito infestation. After the conservation proposal was rejected by the Ministry of Environment, the Committee requested that the marshland be filled up in slow stages to allow for the preparation of an adjacent, manicured pond in the Marina South Public Park for the wild ducks --- as an alternative refuge (NSS letter, 20 May 1992). This was not acceded but, two decades later (2012), this park pond was enlarged and extended to form the Dragonfly Pond in the Gardens by the Bay.

f) **Kent Ridge Environs** (MNS, 1991b): This proposal covers the belukar forest of Kent Ridge Campus. Still very much intact and put into the revised **Singapore Green Plan** as a new Nature Area (URA 2003).

g) **Pulau Ubin** (NSS, 1992): Now a park under NParks management. This proposal was based on an island-wide survey (1991) of the birdlife of Pulau Ubin by the NSS Bird Group when Ubin was a little-explored area in terms of biodiversity. The proposal was a pioneering conservation effort for Ubin. The Conservation Committee again re-emphasised its commitment to the future survival and viability of Ubin as a Nature Area in its Position Paper submitted in 2014 to NParks and MND. This report urged a Nature Reserve designation for Ubin, with one centralized management authority together with proposals for further protecting and enhancing its biodiversity assets. In 2016, NParks was assigned to be this central management agency, which will enable NParks to "respond more quickly and directly to queries and issues raised by residents and the public, instead of having to refer these queries to other agencies..." (NParks, 2016). This is a huge conservation step forward together with the URA's shelving of its plan for the MRT connection as well as for housing and industrial development.

h) **Sungei Khatib Bongsu** (MNS, undated/a) and **South Simpang** (NSS, 1993): The **Khatib Bongsu** proposal covers a mangrove area where the heronry of the Black-crowned Night Heron was located. The **South Simpang** proposal is an expanded and updated proposal which includes the heronry, and covers a larger area from Sungei Khatib Bongsu to the eastern flank of Sungei Seletar estuary. The proposed area is mostly mangrove with some wooded areas along its landward side included. It was designated in the **Simpang Development Guide Plan** (1993) as a Nature Area to be integrated into the housing plan. It is also mentioned in the budget speech in Parliament by Mr Lim Hng Kiang, the then MND Acting Minister, as a conservation site together with Sungei Buloh (refer Singapore Parliament Report: 18 March 1994).

The comment in **BESG** that "Sungei Khatib Bongsu was eventually canalized and the surrounding area reclaimed and developed into a reservoir" (**BESG**, 2017c) is incorrect. In 2004, on request from the PUB, the NSS Conservation Committee submitted a report on the important wildlife of the Khatib Bongsu-Sungei Seletar Estuary Area (NSS, 2004). In response to the Committee's report, PUB replied that there are no plans to develop Sungei Seletar Estuary, Sungei Khatib Bongsu and Sungei Simpang into a reservoir in the near future. Any reservoir development there will likely be in tandem with other developments in the area (PUB's letter, 5 April 2007). The lower reaches of the river are still uncanalised and the reservoir has been put on hold and only a slice of the forest at the landward area had to give way to a new road (Yishun Avenue 8) and an international college. Most of the

mangrove and forest are still intact under MINDEF management (Lim, 2014). The government will have to be reminded of their commitment here as planned in the 1993 Simpang DGP and declared by Mr Lim Hng Keang in Parliament.

i) **Bukit Brown** (NSS, 2011 & Ho, 2012): The position paper submitted was against the development of the new 8-lane expressway through a part of Bukit Brown near Lornie Road. Also built into NSS's objection was that the expressway will overwhelm an important and beautiful valley that has an interesting stream and birdlife --- to which the government responded by building a viaduct over the valley. According to a comment posted in **BESG**, the trees at Bukit Brown "were common roadside species and the other plants were similarly common" (**BESG**, 2017d). However, the NSS Conservation Committee took an ecological view, regarding the wild vegetation proliferating there for decades as an extended habitat for forest wildlife. Over years of monitoring, the Bird Group and other birdwatchers have recorded at least 50 species of forest birdlife there, including 15 nationally threatened species such as the White-bellied Woodpecker, Violet Cuckoo, Black-headed Bulbul, Red-eyed Bulbul, etc. (NSS, 2011; Ho, 2012). Also, rare or nationally threatened forest butterfly species have appeared in the area like the Golden Royal and the Banded Line Blue, a new record for Singapore, (A. Jain, personal comm., Dec 2012) as well as the interesting Malayan Colugo (Flying Lemur).

To say that the area "had absolutely no conservation value" (**BESG**, 2017d) because there are no rare or nationally threatened plants is to take a one-sided perspective or dis-ecological view of nature conservation. The area provides sustenance for the many wildlife of the neighbouring MacRitchie forest of the Nature Reserve. To the question: "Does it mean that any areas or trees on which birds land regularly need to be preserved?" (**BESG**, 2017d), the answer is not obviously an outright "no". Of course, they don't have to be birds. If the area has many nationally threatened as well as uncommon wildlife, especially forest-affiliated species, the area is certainly worth conserving. Otherwise, it would be foolish to seek the preservation of Sungei Buloh for migratory birds three decades ago, when there was very little vegetation around the area at all, let alone any plants being rare or endangered.

#### **D) Concluding Remarks**

The above-mentioned efforts of NSS to save or to secure the long-term survival of unprotected nature areas is only part of the work of the Conservation Committee under the Society's auspices. That the Society, including of course the Conservation Committee, is committed seriously to defend the integrity of the Nature Reserves goes without saying. Recent evidence includes our position papers on the Cross Island MRT Line Project and also on the Mandai tourism project by Mandai Safari Park Holdings (MSPH), the latter involving NSS's effort to expand the boundary of the Central Catchment Nature Reserve (CCNR) at its north-western sector to provide a viable buffer and wildlife connectivity along the Reserve's almost negligible territorial ground there.

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