

Nature Society's Feedback on the URA's Punggol Recreational Plan

This feedback is based on information of the birdlife gathered by the Society's Bird Group (see the **Appendix**) and also on a ground study of the URA Recreational/Waterfront Plan which was announced in **The Straits Times** (19 November 2007). A group of Nature Society's Conservation Volunteers paid a visit to the field, studying the terrain, plantlife and birdlife of the area in the context of the URA's announced Plan ---- from Punggol Marina to Sungei Serangoon. After a formal discussion, this feedback with its proposals is presented in the hope that it will be accepted for the enhancement of the Plan in term of its nature-oriented dimension. We believe that this nature dimension is highly desired by the people of Singapore ---- as was indicated by the wishes expressed by the Punggol residents and mentioned by Admiral Teo Chee Hean.

A) The Punggol Point Walk (1.2km)

This is a walk stretching across Punggol Point along the coast from the west to the east (See the URA Plan). It is a very interesting walk in terms of aesthetics and natural features.

1) Boulders: The boulders or rocks scattered along the shore/beach add greatly to the charm of the walk. Whether human-deposited or not, they should not be removed. They harbour plenty of intertidal life forms and would be a source of fascination for children.

2) Coastal Vegetation: Growing along the upper shore or beach are many species of shrubs (e.g. Sea Hibiscus), creepers (e.g. Sea Glory, *Coccina indica*, Yellow Daisy) and tree saplings (e.g. Casuarina, Sea Almond.) These vegetation should not be cleared, as they harbour plenty of butterflies which lend a great deal of nature interest and liveliness to the walk along these stretch. Birds also forage for food along this belt of coastal greenery, such as the Ashy Tailorbird, the Yellow-vented Bulbul, etc.

3) The Question of Boardwalk: The relevant authority in charge may be tempted to create a boardwalk along this stretch.

There should be no boardwalk along this stretch at all --- whether along the beach proper or at the edge of the dry ground. This is unnecessary. And will spoil the natural charm of the area. In fact, there is already an existing pathway on the drier high ground running from the existing stream on the western end all the way to Punggol Road and this pathway can be made into a gravelled track. However from the this pathway, several small viewing platform jutting slightly out of the path and overhanging the sands can be erected for a closer view of the beach among the strollers.

Other Considerations

1) Monsoon Drain: The small monsoon drain at the western end of the walk should be deconcretised all the way to Punggol 17th Avenue, beyond which it continues upstream in an unconcretised state. This would make the stream natural to encourage wildlife such as the water-loving bird species (e.g. White-breasted Waterhen, Slaty-breasted Rail) and dragonflies to forage along the stream.

2) Existing Woodlands: The area to the western side of the walk all the way to the Punggol Marina is covered with beautiful patches of woodland. Along the coast is a stretch of Casuarinas, which forms a pleasant and beautiful backdrop to the open ground at the coast, popular among anglers and picnickers as well as wedding couples who venture into the Casuarina grove for more romantic or wilder shots of nuptial bliss. On the hill occupied by the now defunct MOE Punggol Adventure Centre is a large patch of tall and mature Albizias, which should also be preserved as another beautiful green backdrop to the walk and as a refuge for the birdlife, which are plentiful here.

B) The Nature Walk (2.4km)

This is planned to take off from the Punggol Point Walk at the eastern end and going all the way along the edge of the coast to the estuary of Sungei Serangoon. The walk will cross four small rivers. New bridges we suppose will be built across these rivers at the junction with the Serangoon Reservoir now under construction.

If the trail merely hugs the coastline all the way, then the nature experience is very limited --- to that which can be seen mainly at the edge of the waterbody, which unfortunately is

severely and vertically concretised. The lack of a soft green edge on the seaward front is a huge stumbling block to making such a coastal walk interesting and exciting from a nature appreciation point of view. Birds sighted along the edge of the coastline are invariably the House Crow, Grey Heron, Striated Heron, Collared Kingfisher, and these tend to repeat themselves all along the way.

To overcome this severe limitation, we strongly recommend the following features to be implemented:

1) **Trail Along the Rivers:** There are four small rivers flowing into the Reservoir. The nature trail should turn inland along **the first and last** of these rivers (coming from Punggol Point) and cross over on the existing old bridges, which of course need to be renovated, made firm and durable. The first and last of these rivers are not concretised, but are only rock-padded at the banks and have many trees and shrubby growth along the verges as well as young mangrove along the softer mud-beds.

The mangrove will die out as the rivers become flooded when the Serangoon Reservoir is completed, but the dryland vegetation will survive on the verges. These should not be cleared as they are foraging grounds for many species of birdlife and butterflies, whose presence will make the walk more interesting and lively. Species of birds recorded here are: the Striated Heron, Little Bronze Cuckoo, Ashy Tailorbird, Chestnut-winged Cuckoo (migratory), Pie Fantail, Pink-necked Green Pigeon, Yellow-vented Bulbul, etc.

2) **Need for a Swale (Shallow Marshy Pond):** The third river, running along the old Punggol Port Road from Punggol Road to the Reservoir with a sharp bend is the longest but is heavily concretised. Currently, this river has accumulated a layer of mud and aquatic vegetation has grown over the mud-bed, making it look somewhat natural despite the concretization.

A sort of marshy habitat has arisen along the river all the way to the coast, providing good foraging ground for many species of migratory shorebirds (sandpipers, plovers, snipes, etc.) as well as resident marshland bird species such as the Greater Painted Snipe (a rare & nationally-threatened species), the Chestnut Bittern, the Ruddy-breasted Crake (an uncommon & nationally near-threatened species), etc. Unfortunately, the river will be permanently flooded when the Reservoir is completed and most of

the migratory shorebird will disappear as they need the mudbed below the shallow waters to get their food.

However, to remedy this setback to the marshland birdlife, we strongly propose that a swale (marshy pond) be created as the river enters the Reservoir. The swale here can spread out either on one side or on both sides of the river with shallow water, allowing for aquatic growth and feeding ground for the herons, bitterns, rails, crakes and even the Greater Painted Snipe, while the deeper open water can attract the Common Moorhen, the Lesser Whistling Duck, etc. Apart from attracting marshland bird species, it will add variety to natural attractions as well as enhancing the scenic beauty of the coastline if properly designed and constructed.

3) Belt of Trees & Grasses: It is proposed that on the landward side of this Nature Walk, the existing belt of trees (Casuarinas, Acacia, Petai Belalang, etc.) and patches of grasses (mostly *Pennisetum*) be allowed to stand as they form an important habitat for the birdlife and butterflies.

The grassy patches are important feeding for grassland bird species such as the Brown (migratory) and the Long-tailed Shrike, the Eastern Marsh Harrier (migratory), the Baya Weaver and the Munias. To maintain in perpetuity these grassy patches, they of course need to be cleared off the tree saplings and shrubs that will as a matter of time colonise and dominate these open areas.

Native fruiting trees with ample canopy and beautiful flowers should also be planted along the seaward side of the Walk to provide shade against the sun, as this part of the walk is pretty shadeless all along the way.

4) Planting Trees & Bird Perches: On the seaward front is a monotonous wall of vertical concrete. Here it is proposed that a sloping front with steps or platforms for sitting should be considered to break up this monotony and also to allow for a closer proximity to the water for the pleasure of the strollers and nature lovers. Perching stakes or platforms should also be created in the waterbody for the birds that frequent the coastline. They are currently using the existing railings but with the opening up of the Walk, they will be frequently flushed and disturbed by visitors. The perches can attract other sea and coastal birds other than those mentioned above --- such as the Terns, the Swallows, the Osprey, the White-bellied Sea Eagle, the Brahminy Kite.

C) Riverside Walk (1.3km)

This Riverside Walk is planned to begin where the Nature Walk ends ---- at the Serangoon Estuary. It is intended to have highlights like a golf driving range and a two-tiered promenade together with fishing points and rest shelters. We presume that it will be very artificial in orientation with emphasis on built features and facilities.

We have no objection against this plan, but would strongly urge that the Nature Walk should not end where this Walk begins. There is no need for the Nature Walk to backtrack along the same trail. It could use the Riverside Walk to continue in a loop back to the starting point by following the planned new Waterway winding across the land from here to Sungei Punggol.

The estuary here is a good vantage point too for observation of the various sea birds, such as the White-bellied Sea eagle, the Grey-headed Fish Eagle and the Osprey, soaring and circling above the more open water here and diving down for its prey.

D) The Planned Waterway From Sg Serangoon to Sg. Punggol

This is a very bold and excellent feature to the Plan. It will extend the mileage for outdoor recreational activities like strolling, canoeing and jogging to residents and visitors alike. It will also add a strong aesthetic dimension to the new town. However the nature-value dimension of the Plan should also be promoted along the Waterway. In fact, the existing short river that runs into the estuary and from which the Waterway is to be extended is a feeding ground for many species of birds --- such as the kingfishers, and wading birds, migratory and resident, during the low tides (sandpipers, egrets, herons, etc.) The shrubs and mangrove plants along the banks are also attractive to terrestrial birds.

1) Soft Banks & Edges: To promote the Waterway as a nature feature as well as to enhance its aesthetic dimension, we propose that it should not be cemented but should have a muddy bed and a sloping and soft embankment, preferably of loose rocks, where waterloving plants can find a niche. These will nurture the aquatic life (such as local freshwater fishlife which can

be introduced) as well as attract the birds and the butterflies into the HDB heartland. This will make the Waterway somewhat 'untidy' and some residents probably may not like it that way.

2) Two-Toned Compromise: However, a compromise can be achieved between the nature lovers and the clean-&-tidy faction by having roughly to two tones to the edges of the Waterway. This two-toned proposal should not be taken as a hard-&-fast rule, but only as a guideline. Here we propose that on the northern side of it, a natural edge should be implemented to coincide with the proposal to continue the Nature Walk in a loop back to Punggol Road rather than to end abruptly at the Serangoon Estuary. Here, wild grasses, shrubs and trees should be allowed to grow with a non-cemented track. While on the southern side, to harmonise with the bulk of the residential setting, a tidier edge should dominate for more comfortable walks with a cemented path and rain-shelters and sitting areas with a gardenised setting.

E) The Planned Bridge Across Sungei Serangoon

This new vehicular bridge is planned to run across Sungei Serangoon from Punggol Central to land somewhere in the area of the Lorong Halus Track. This runs right smack or close to the edge of the Lorong Halus Ponds and Sungei Blukar. This would be disastrous for the wetland and the birdlife inhabiting the ponds and the marsh around these ponds and Sg. Blukar ---- in particular the Little Grebe, a rare and nationally threatened species, that is nesting and breeding there.

Is there a need to built this vehicular bridge? Is this to facilitate drivers moving from the east to the west and vice versa ? For such a purpose, there is already the Tampines Expressway. Cars are already a big headache in Singapore and the policy now as promulgated by the Minister of Transport is to cut down on car uses and to promote public transport. We strongly urge that the pampering of motorcar drivers going on for decades be put to rest and with this in view, the vehicular bridge across Sg Serangoon be completely abandoned.

In its place, we propose that only a pedestrian bridge be built instead to facilitate and further the recreational activities and enjoyment of the people at Punggol to the the Lorong Halus area, which has a more natural setting with its very rich

birdlife and butterflies. This can coincide with an MRT line across Sg Serangoon but care must be taken as to its alignment and route to avoid jeopardizing the natural values at the Halus area. The ponds and marshy area here has already been planned by PUB as a wetland park. We are very disappointed that a more holistic planning process --- taking a wider landscape ecological framework that is now the standard planning procedure in environmentally advanced countries around the world ---- has not been applied for the URA Recreational Plan

Public Park & Wetland Bird Sanctuary for Lorong Halus:

As given in the PUB ABC Waters Programme exhibit, a wetland park is planned to cover the area around the two ponds and Sg Blukar. We strongly propose that a public park be also created here --- embracing the two ponds and Sg Blukar and the whole area occupied by the capped dumping ground, i.e. covering as well as not just the wetland areas but also the two artificial hills, one to the north and the other to the south of Sg Blukar. The two ponds and the marshes around it can be set up as a wetland bird sanctuary within this proposed park.

The hills have become very green and wooded over the years, providing a refuge for resident (e.g. Black-crowned Night Heron) and migratory bird species (e.g. raptors like Black Baza & Oriental Honey Buzzard, as well as cuckoos, flycatchers, warblers, etc.). In a recent survey (2006) by the Society's Bird Group, a total of 63 species are recorded around the ponds and its environs, which is very impressive for such a small area. The total number of species for Singapore is 364 (Ref. Society's **Pocket Checklist 2007**.) Apart from the birdlife, the area is also rich in butterflies --- where 20 species have been recorded (in 2007 by the Society's Butterfly Interest Group), 4 of which are rare in Singapore and they are: the Common Tiger, the Grey Pansy, the Great Eggfly and the Silver Forget-Me-Not.

Walking and nature trails can be routed across the whole area with the proposed pedestrian bridge across Sg Serangoon to provide access to and from Punggol. Motor-cross activities should be completely disallowed in this park. The patches of woodlands on the banks of Sg Serangoon and on the two hills should be preserved as refuges for the birds and other wildlife.

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URA Punggol Recreational Plan

