

As Clementi forest grows in popularity, conservationists caution of impact on environment

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SINGAPORE — With its tall trees, lush foliage, freshwater streams and the shrieks of raptors circling overhead, there is a primal feel to Clementi Forest that appeals to 28-year-old arts manager Joey Cheng. “It doesn’t help that it looks like (a scene out of) Jurassic Park, and I’m a big fan,” the hiking enthusiast said, referencing the Hollywood movie franchise, as she trudged out of the muddy forest with a friend on Tuesday (Jan 5) afternoon. For 60-year-old grandmother Asmah Ahmad, the muddy ground and undulating terrain provided the adventure that she seeks, which she cannot find in Singapore’s official parks and reserves. “In MacRitchie, they’ve already made a trail for you to walk and you just follow it. This one, there is no (official) trail. We just walk on our own,” the housewife said. She was there with her friends early last month. Fellow hiker Chan HP, who has visited the forest six times since last October, added that there is a sense of majesty to see trees “tower high above you” when standing along an abandoned railway track that sits on the lowest level of the forest floor.

“Where else in Singapore can we walk on an abandoned railway reclaimed by nature?” the 49-year-old realtor asked, referring to the Jurong Line section of the former railway that is hidden within the 85-hectare secondary forest. The railway was used by trains run by the Malaysian rail operator Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM) until July 2011.

These hikers are among a growing number of nature lovers who have visited the forest since stunning images of it went viral in October last year and captured the imagination of the nation. So much so that Workers’ Party Member of Parliament Dennis Tan asked during Monday’s parliamentary session whether there would be a review of the status of the unprotected Clementi Forest.

The forest — bound by King Albert Park, Clementi Road, Old Holland-Ulu Pandan Road and the Rail Corridor — has been earmarked for residential development under the 2019 masterplan by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). In his response to Mr Tan, National Development Minister Desmond Lee said that the much-talked-about forest will remain classified for residential use, despite the public clamour for it to be conserved. “There is no immediate need to develop the site for housing. We will, however, retain the zoning of the site, while giving our future generations the option of deciding whether to use it for housing, if the need arises,” Mr Lee explained. For now, Mr Brice Li, the man behind the iconic images of Clementi Forest, has indeed noticed the presence of many more hikers after his pictures went viral. The 52-year-old creative and art director, who has returned to the forest several times to check on its condition, said that while he has not spotted much litter, there is evidence of people “blazing their own trails” to avoid muddy patches during their hike. Consequently, these new trails “keep getting bigger and bigger”, he said. Mr Li is a member of the Nature Society Singapore (NSS).

Two months ago, Mr Li suggested the possibility of creating an interim park with a 500m elevated nature trail boardwalk, similar to the one at Lower Peirce Reservoir or Chek Jawa Wetland, to help protect the forest. In response to TODAY’s queries about the feasibility of Mr Li’s idea, a URA spokesperson said that agencies will “work closely with stakeholders on any plans for or around the site, and take into consideration their feedback and ideas”.

COST OF HUMAN INTRUSION

While the nature community at large is glad for the positive attention the forest is receiving, environmentalists have urged nature-lovers and visitors to be mindful of their presence to minimise ecological impact on it. Wildlife activist Vilma D’Rozario fears indiscriminate trampling through the forest could result in the accidental destruction of seedlings, which are important for the forest.

Dr Ho Hua Chew, NSS’ vice-president, agreed, adding that human presence in large numbers can cause alarm to the wildlife. “There will be no core area like you have in a properly managed nature park or reserve for sensitive wildlife to retreat and find a refuge until the disturbances subsided,” the conservationist said. “The stress from human disturbances will be relentless until the night and darkness, but those that need to search for food or prey in the daytime will be severely stressed.” Dr Ho co-authored the book *The Green Rail Corridor*, published by NSS in 2019, which provides an overview of the ecology and biodiversity of the Rail Corridor, and why unprotected nature areas along it like Clementi Forest, Mandai Mangrove and Mudflats, and Spottiswoode Woodland need to be conserved. Dr Chong Kwek Yan, a scientist who co-authored a 2012 study that focused on plants within Clementi Forest, said that as it is really “quite small”, the public should stick to more established walking paths such as the former railway lines. However, Dr Chong, who is also a senior tutor at the National University of Singapore’s department of biological sciences, is more concerned about human safety. “It’s easy to slip and fall in some places, especially after it rains.” He believes that having a boardwalk will improve safety for hikers, although cost would be a consideration, “especially if this place would still be developed in the future”, he said. Still, Mr Leong Kwok Peng, NSS’ conservation committee chair, pointed out that any impact caused by humans “is nothing compared” to that of the forest being cleared to make way for housing.

FACTS ABOUT CLEMENTI FOREST

Both NSS and Dr Chong said that more studies need to be conducted to get a complete picture of the flora and fauna within Clementi Forest, but the work that they have done so far has yielded some interesting facts about it. For instance, it used to be part of a rubber plantation during the 1920s to the 1940s, and Dr Chong and his team believe that it was abandoned during World War II. Within the forest, the team identified 98 species of vascular plants — among them rare native species such as the *Dienia ophrydis*, an orchid which was presumed to be extinct here.

About 20 per cent of the recorded species are nationally threatened. NSS, which devoted 14 pages to Clementi Forest in its book, said that the forest is the second-largest patch of wildlife habitat along the Rail Corridor, after Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. The society added that it has “great potential to develop into a secondary forest that will be more attractive to a greater variety of wildlife than currently exists”. One notable mammal it found is the critically endangered *sunda pangolin*. ‘RESPECT WILL KEEP YOU SAFE’ For those wishing to explore the forest, Dr Ho from NSS said that they should move in small groups of two to four people at a time, while taking care to make as little noise as possible. “Be silent and open up your eyes and ears to the surrounding forest — and more can be seen and enjoyed. You will see more by keeping quiet and still at a particular spot than roaming around.” As to the matter of personal safety, Dr Ho warns that the dangers come not so much from snakes or wild boars, but hornets. Dr Chong also said: “You may want your adventure, but please keep to the (existing) trails and respect nature. That respect will keep you safe.”

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