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Singapore Government

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SPEECH BY ASSOC. PROF. KOO TSAI KEE AT THE LAUNCH OF GUIDEBOOKS ON NATURAL HISTORY
AT THE SINGAPORE SCIENCE CENTRE AT 10:00 AM ON 20 JULY 1999

There has been in recent years a revival of interest in nature due in part to the current global concern for the environment and the general resurgence of interest in health and healthy living.

Preserving our natural environment is part and parcel of preserving our Singaporean heritage. Many Singaporeans may not realise that, living in the heart of Southeast Asia, we have a tropical paradise with an intensely rich flora and fauna. This fact has been borne out by the latest findings of a 6-year survey of the nature reserves by the National Parks Board. The survey showed that Singapore probably has the highest biodiversity density in the world, with more than 2000 species of plants and animals found in a very small area. We have an important place in Southeast Asia natural history as many plants and animals were first described here. Many famous scientists have visited and studied local flora and fauna including Alfred Russell Wallace, who with Darwin proposed the theory of evolution.

The two guide books that are being launched today are about our mangroves. Many people think of mangroves as muddy, mosquito-infested swamps which could be removed for better use. In countries such as Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia and Australia, products from the mangroves are significant and include fuel wood and charcoal, scaffolding poles, edible fish and crabs, tannins and dyes, nipah products (atap chee), honey, wood for chipboard and the paper pulp industry.

Although not much is left of the mangroves in Singapore, these areas still have important functions in nature. The mangrove ecosystem acts as a nursery, supporting many commercially important organisms such as crabs, fish and prawns at critical stages of their growth. Mangroves protect the coast by absorbing the energy of high waves and storms. Mangrove forests act as a buffer between the land and sea trapping sediment and mud from land, stabilising shorelines and also preventing clouding of water that could cause sea corals to die.

At the same time, mangroves provide opportunity for recreation and ecotourism. This has been exploited in Malaysia, in Kuala Selangor and Pulau Langkawi in Malaysia.

Although there are great demands made on the use of our land, about 5% of the total land area has been set aside for nature conservation. The National Parks Board manages these areas which include two of the remaining mangrove forests in Singapore: Sungei Buloh Nature Park and Pasir Ris Park. Quite incredibly, even in the little mangrove that we have, research in the 1990s alone has led to the discovery of nine new species of animals. Hence, our mangroves are still very interesting places to visit with the anticipation of more discoveries to come.

These nature parks are used extensively for education on environmental issues, nature conservation and mangrove flora and fauna. The new guide books highlight many mangrove features that can be seen in these parks. In the process of using the guide books to discover mangrove wildlife, it is hoped that Singaporeans cultivate a love for nature and a shared responsibility for taking good care of our planet earth.

The guide book series is one of the ways the Science Centre strives to educate students, families and the public about the environment. Enrichment programmes as well as promotional activities during Earth Day and Ecoweek such as talks, laboratory classes, film shows, science shows, field trips and exhibitions also help to introduce nature awareness to Science Centre's visitors. Last year, about 10,000 students attended programmes relating to the environment at the Science Centre.

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The two latest guide books represent a continuation of a series of books which have been published since 1981 under the sponsorship of BP Singapore Pte Ltd. The guide books aim to create awareness of local flora and fauna and are extremely popular with students, educators and nature lovers. Twenty-four of the titles in the series have gone into reprint with another title due to be reprinted this year.

I should like to commend the authors of the series, past and present as well as the sponsor, BP Singapore, for their efforts in creating awareness of our natural history. I hope authors continue to come forward to contribute to a series that benefits Singaporeans.

It is my pleasure to launch the two new guide books this morning.

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