

# Relook portrayal of nature in Singapore's history textbooks: Study

Ang Qing

How the environment is portrayed in Singapore's history textbooks should be relooked to give students a more comprehensive understanding about sustainability, two researchers say.

In a recent study, the Yale-NUS College researchers found that history books here often focus on Singapore's developmental history, with little mention about the trade-offs the country had to make in terms of its natural environment.

The authors say that amid growing awareness about the need to tackle environmental challenges such as climate change, students need to have a better understanding of the benefits of nature and the negative impact of prioritising

development over conservation.

This was something that was not apparent in their analysis of lower-secondary history textbooks used in schools here between 1984 and 2015, the authors said. History is a compulsory subject for most lower-secondary students.

The study's lead author Neo Xiaoyun, a Yale-NUS graduate, said: "History introduces students to the narrative of Singapore and is likely to have a significant impact on students' mindsets and attitudes."

The study published in the journal *Environmental Education Research* last month found that the environment is often framed in textbooks as a resource to be exploited, feared or tamed.

Sections describing Malayan tigers in Singapore, for instance, focused on how these creatures were attacking villagers.

But there was little mention of how human activity – such as the clearing of forests for gambier and pepper plantations – had encroached upon the habitats of the big cats and contributed to the rise in human-wildlife conflict.

The study also found that mentions of historical deforestation focused more on the economic benefits and less on the trade-offs.

For instance, in 1999, history textbooks started highlighting first finance minister Goh Keng Swee as a key figure in developing Jurong Island while omitting the negative socio-ecological impacts of transforming Jurong. These included biodiversity loss and the displacement of residents living there.

Associate Professor Matthew Schneider-Mayerson of Yale-NUS, a co-author of the paper, said that environmental education goes

beyond field trips or the study of ecology. "It's also about the implicit narratives about the environment and our relationship to it," he said.

Co-director of Singapore Wildcat Action Group Vilma D'Rozario welcomed the study's call to promote narratives in history textbooks that recognise how human life is closely tied to the environment and the impact that humans have on the natural world.

As "leaders of tomorrow", children need to know the value of wild spaces, said Dr D'Rozario, a retired associate professor of psychological studies at the National Institute of Education. She said that perceptions of animals as dangerous or a nuisance need to change as human-wildlife interactions increase.

Asked for comment on the study, the Ministry of Education's (MOE) Ms Beatrice Chong, a divisional

director of curriculum planning and development, said environmental education in Singapore is woven across multiple subjects from primary to pre-university levels.

In secondary school, for example, students learn about natural resource depletion and the environmental impact of rising global temperatures and waste disposal through the geography, sciences and social studies syllabuses. Lessons in character and citizenship education also inculcate the values of care, respect and responsibility in the context of environmental conservation.

"Subjects like science, geography and social studies develop in students an in-depth understanding of human-environment relationships," said Ms Chong.

History, on the other hand, focuses more on human relation-

ships and interactions, as well as the key developments and events that shaped the past and present.

But Ms Chong said that students interested in human interactions with the environment in Singapore's history can pursue this further by developing their own projects.

She said that the MOE is strengthening environmental education in schools in line with the Singapore Green Plan – the nation's blueprint for sustainable development – and had launched the Eco Stewardship Programme earlier this year.

Under this programme, a slew of initiatives were introduced, including the revision of the Primary Social Studies curriculum to teach pupils about the importance of using resources wisely.

aqing@sph.com.sg