

# 3 new species of tiny ‘moss animals’ found in S’pore waters

Their discovery in Sisters’ Islands Marine Park revealed yesterday at new exhibition

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Three new species of “moss animals” were discovered here a few years ago growing on coral rubble, seaweed and sea sponge within the Sisters’ Islands Marine Park.

Moss animals are tiny, simple aquatic creatures that resemble the small plants and are classified under a group of marine life called bryozoa.

Bryozoans are invertebrates that exist in small colonies while encrusted on larger objects such as coral rubble. Each colony is about a few centimetres wide, much like moss growing on a piece of log.

Scientists from the National University of Singapore (NUS) discovered the three new species while surveying and collecting bryozoans for a project in 2019.

The discovery of the three new species was announced by Minis-

ter for National Development Desmond Lee yesterday, as he launched a new exhibition on safeguarding the ocean and conserving marine life, at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

Mr Lee added that the NUS scientists also found nine existing species of bryozoans that were recorded in Singapore for the first time.

This brings the total number of bryozoan species in Singapore to 133.

“Bryozoans are simple, filter-feeding animals and, interestingly, some of them have been found to be a promising source of anti-cancer drugs,” he noted.

Despite being a small city-state, Singapore is home to rich marine biodiversity, with more than 250 species of hard corals and 120 species of reef fish.

Mr Lee stressed the need to continue protecting marine ecosystems and habitats that are at risk of

harsh climate change impacts such as sea-level rise and ocean acidification, which causes coral bleaching.

The new exhibition at the Botanic Gardens was jointly curated by property developer City Developments Limited (CDL), the National Parks Board (NParks), and Ocean Geographic, an international marine-themed publication.

Housed in the CDL Green Gallery at the Botanic Gardens, the exhibition comprises display panels, graphics and photos that highlight the importance of regional and global efforts towards coastal and marine conservation.

It summarises pledges made at last year’s COP26 climate change conference and how nations promised to strengthen ocean-based action, and outlines Singapore’s marine conservation plans, among other information.

Visitors can also learn about native marine creatures from photo displays.

Admission to the exhibition is free and it will run from today to August.

One of the three new bryozoan species, *Reptadeonella riatanae*,



Visitors can learn about native marine creatures at a new exhibition at the Botanic Gardens, which summarises pledges made at last year’s COP26 climate change conference and outlines Singapore’s marine conservation plans. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

was named after Ms Ria Tan, a long-time marine enthusiast who runs the wildlife website WildSingapore.

A colony of the *Reptadeonella riatanae* was discovered encrusted on marine sponge at Pulau Tekukor, said NUS marine biologist Huang Danwei, one of the scientists who helped discover the three new species and nine new local records.

Despite being tiny living things, bryozoans help contribute to reef-building and provide habitats for much smaller marine organisms, said Assistant Professor Huang.

The creatures are essential in providing the three-dimensional struc-

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ture of coral reefs as they form external skeletons made of calcium carbonate, he explained.

NParks’ National Biodiversity Centre director Karenne Tun

added that when bryozoa form their calcium carbonate skeletons, they can help to act as a “natural glue” to bind loose coral rubble together.

Mr Lee also encouraged more members of the public to volunteer in the marine conservation scene by joining NParks’ Intertidal Watch citizen programme, for instance, to help educate visitors about Singapore’s coastal and intertidal habitats and responsible etiquette at those sites.

Individuals can also volunteer as “citizen scientists”, and help with marine biodiversity surveys.

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