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Associate Professor Darren Yeo, head of the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum, at the launch of the Signify project yesterday. The event was held physically at the Attenborough Studio of the Natural History Museum of London, with live virtual participation from the Singapore museum. PHOTO: IFFAH LESA

Project to digitise 200 years of S'pore natural specimens

In world first, Lee Kong Chian museum to help put country's biodiversity data online

Gena Soh

Modern Singapore was born when it achieved independence in 1965, but the island and its surrounding areas have been rich in wildlife for millions of years.

Now, researchers have embarked on a project that aims to preserve – in digital form – about 10,000 key natural specimens found in Singapore in the last 200 years.

Yesterday, the five-year project digitising all significant natural specimens from the island was launched in London and Singapore.

Scientists from the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum at the National University of Singapore – with partners like the Natural History Museum of London – will digitally catalogue, for instance, the first snake in Singapore to be given a scientific name, the mangrove pit viper, and the first primate, the famous Raffles' banded langur.

The project marks the first attempt globally at making a country's biodiversity data freely available online to the world.

Associate Professor Darren Yeo, head of the Lee Kong Chian museum, said: "For the past 150 years, thousands of specimens... have journeyed between the Raffles Museum in Singapore – the predecessor of the current Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum – and the Natural History Museum in London."

With most of Singapore's specimens prior to independence housed in Britain due to its colonial legacy, Prof Yeo added: "This landmark endeavour aims to bring together digitisation and research on as many of Singapore's native animals as possible."

Known as Signify, which stands for Singapore in Global Natural History Museums Information Facility, the project will document all historically significant specimens and type specimens from Singapore in both museums.

Type specimens are physical examples of any species that serve as a reference point for when a species is first named. Historical specimens include the first animals from Singapore that were given scientific names, among other things.

The project will produce high-resolution digital specimens starting with material from both museums and, where possible, contextualise them with information about who, where, when and how the specimen was collected.

Mr Martyn Low, research associate at the Lee Kong Chian museum and manager of the project, said these specimens will be invaluable for studying the original biodiversity of Singapore and crucial in directing research and conservation priorities, both locally and regionally.

He added: "These early specimens can also help us better understand the original fauna of Singapore and, therefore, the natural heritage of the island... These specimens and their data are no different from the equally rich heritage of artefacts and documents that compose the rich historical tapestry of our island home."

Speaker of Parliament Tan Chuan-Jin, who was at the launch, said that learning the stories of how countries are connected through the study of natural history would be critical in constructing a shared future.

Mr Tan, who is also chairman of the Lee Kong Chian museum's advisory committee, said: "The challenges facing both our countries are immense and will require more than just collecting more of what has come before."

He added: "This project is a step towards (solving) this by fostering a deeper conversation between history and science – between the past and the present – and by bringing the scientists of both museums, and both countries, together."

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Scientists in the five-year project will digitally catalogue, for instance, the first snake in Singapore to be given a scientific name – the mangrove pit viper (above, seen in the Natural History Museum of London). PHOTO: SIGNIFY

RICH HISTORY

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MR MARTYN LOW, research associate at the Lee Kong Chian museum and manager of the project.