

Forest City is awakening, with new settlers of an unexpected kind

Against a backdrop of empty tower blocks, nature is reclaiming its place – a development worth encouraging.

Serina Rahman

A group of school students sit near mangroves, noting the wildlife observed – birds, smooth-coated otters, crocodiles, monkeys, snakes, reptiles and insects.

The location? An island created from reclaimed land in Johor across from Singapore.

The setting seems idyllic, but this is not a primary coastal forest. It is an island of tower-block apartments and other residential infrastructure called Forest City.

The same place is often referred to by the media as “ghost city”, a mega-development by Chinese investors that was never completed amid the Covid-19 pandemic and financial woes.

News reports about the development often underscore its falling into disrepair and neglect. Main backer Country Garden's target was to have 700,000 people living in the completed 1,370ha development, but the artificial city launched in 2016 has barely 10,000 residents today. It was even branded the “World's 2nd Most Useless Mega Project” by YouTube channel Top Luxury.

Less covered are the ways in which Mother Earth is making her presence felt.

NATURE RETURNS

As someone who lives in the community around Forest City Island and has studied its rise, I have seen the seagrass and mangroves return.

It's not just me. Students and staff at the Shattuck-St Mary's Forest City (SSM-FC) International School – set up in the early days of Forest City – have been trained by a local community organisation, Kelab Alami, as citizen scientists. Over the past two years, under the leadership of its head, Dr Gregg Maloberti, they have documented the wilding of the island.

The results are fascinating. Ms Glenda Lakey, a teacher at SSM-FC, has recorded more than 100 species of birds, both resident and migratory. The island has become an important stopover for migrating birds from the Northern Hemisphere that head south for the winter.

She has recorded a number of rarely seen migratory species such

as the ruddy kingfisher – a highly sought-after species by bird-watching enthusiasts – as well as the blue-tailed bee eater and blue-throated bee eater.

Students under her tutelage excitedly point out milky storks and lesser adjutant storks on the mudflats or walking through the mangroves, both of which are endangered and endemic to South-east Asia.

Ironically, the very same problems that Forest City faced amid a property crisis in China and the lockdown during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic have enabled nature to thrive.

Yet, it is hard to pinpoint when the birds started returning. When Ms Lakey first arrived at Forest City, her early-morning walks were eerily silent. Now, just before dawn breaks, the campus is filled with the sounds of both the large-tailed nighthawk and savannah nighthawk. Art class students on the top floor are often visited by a pair of oriental pied hornbills. At night, the red-wattled lapwing can be heard screeching.

It is a small school, and the 250 or so students and staff have caught on to the initiative to record and report the many animals, reptiles and insects spotted. They reflect in wonder at the healthy biodiversity slowly engulfing the island.

The community organisation also works with the school to document nearby seagrass habitats. Mangroves have settled naturally along the island's shores, with marine fauna such as endangered horseshoe crabs and juvenile catfish returning – living proof that the habitats are beginning to serve their function as breeding grounds for more marine life.

When Forest City removed a bridge previously created to facilitate the transport of sand, the seagrass meadow grew back within two weeks. Local community reports indicate that this has expanded to areas once buried by reclaimed land.

These habitats are vital to the local fishing community and have been key fishing and gleaning areas supporting their livelihoods.

SSM-FC continues to be the heartbeat of the island. About four in 10 of its families live in Forest City apartments; the others are boarders or children of the faculty.

The school is now showing the way by actively engaging with residents for environmental activities such as mangrove-tree planting and beach cleanups, at least once every quarter over the past year.

A mixed luxury residential-and-business development that began reclamation works in 2015, Forest City has been infamous for its



Residential apartments in Forest City in Johor Bahru, Malaysia, built on reclaimed land near Singapore. PHOTO: EPA-EFE



Left: A view from Ataraxia apartments in Forest City where mangroves are colonising the shoreline. Right: A seahorse found during a beach cleanup. Nature is slowly returning to the man-made island. PHOTOS: SERINA RAHMAN



sudden appearance and a subsequent stop-work order by the Malaysian Department of the Environment. The project did not complete a Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment, required by Malaysian law for all reclamation projects.

After some controversy and a revision of the original development plans, the project continued apace. It was officially launched in 2016, with the first keys handed over to apartment owners in 2018.

In the early days, Forest City was touted as a revolutionary approach to island creation and development, with innovative technology in land settlement that enabled piling work to begin just three months after sand dumping. Since then, Chinese government-imposed capital

controls stalled most publicised property sales as its mainly middle-income buyers from China could not complete payments.

The pandemic put paid to any further ambitions for development expansion. Forest City was closed off to the world for health security reasons. Hundreds of construction workers, housed in hostels in the surrounding fishing villages of Mukim Tanjung Kupang, were sent home.

Subsequently, Country Garden, which has a 60 per cent stake in the Forest City project, recorded more than US\$150 billion (S\$199 billion) in losses and defaulted on debt repayments, putting the future of the island development further in doubt.

In sales presentations in China, Country Garden – which says it is business as usual for its Malaysian project – notes that it will not

build the other three islands initially planned for land reclamation, given the environmental impact. Property analysts note a more plausible reason for the about-turn: financial difficulties.

The remaining 40 per cent stake in Forest City is held by the Johor state government, which has a vested interest in its success. In a recent interview with *The Straits Times*, Sultan Ibrahim Iskandar of Johor, who will be appointed Malaysia's king in January 2024, announced an interest in reviving the high-speed rail (HSR) project linking Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, and diverting it through Forest City.

With the King having played a critical role as kingmaker during Malaysia's 2022 General Election, there was little surprise when Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar

Ibrahim announced plans in August to make Forest City a special financial zone (SFZ).

This will, among other things, fast-track entry for those working in Singapore and provide preferential income tax rates, to boost investment.

Today, many of Forest City's residents are renters, largely made up of Malaysians working in Singapore who commute daily to work. On Dec 12, a new bus link to the Second Link bridge and Tuas was announced, making it even easier for visitors or renters to cross the border.

INTEGRATED LIVING WITH NATURE

Perhaps the SFZ and the HSR will deliver the necessary financial injection to revive the island. Such a strong endorsement by the Malaysian government bodes well, considering the disparagement and attempts to kill the project by past administrations.

This also augurs well for new approaches to integrate “forest” and “city”. Research by the community and Kelab Alami has shown that nature can regenerate over areas left fallow around the artificial island. The budding prospects of eco-tourism are bright.

This would require Forest City's management to work actively with the local community to continue protection and research of its surrounding habitats to avoid accusations of greenwashing.

Modest efforts are already under way. Blossom Landscape Forest City, the developer's subsidiary, has transformed the island's greenery, previously manicured to look like a golf course using non-native plants. After the pandemic and toll of the tropical weather, the landscaping was replaced with native species, many grown in nurseries in the surrounding villages.

Today, the area thrives with local flora, and has riverine walkways reminiscent of Sungai Api-Api in Pasir Ris in Singapore. Artificial lakes and wetlands seem so natural, with frequent shorebird and otter sightings, that one almost forgets the entire space is man-made.

News stories carry narratives of Forest City descending into a ghost town, with people expressing buyers' remorse. Yet, reporters I have spoken to gathering information for stories on the development often comment in bewilderment that residents they interviewed seem pretty happy.

I have met residents perched on the beach and exhaling in satisfaction at the seaview. Indeed, if you stand on the reclaimed beachfront of the Ataraxia apartments that look out to where the Johor and Melaka Strait meet, the fresh sea breeze makes it easy to overlook how much damage the island construction has caused to the environment.

Yet, the constant redevelopment in this area is a stark reminder that industrial build-up has not been confined to Forest City alone. There are plans at the nearby Tanjung Piai Maritime Industrial

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Developer and residents can help fauna thrive

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Park for the reclamation of a 1,410ha island for oil, gas and chemical storage. The Port of Tanjung Pelepas and the Tuas Mega Port are both expanding facilities in the vicinity.

ACKNOWLEDGING PAST PROBLEMS

Dr Qiu Lipeng, Country Garden Malaysia-Singapore's region vice-president, acknowledged the problems that arose in the early days, but stressed greater efforts to reduce Forest City's environmental impact.

"I cannot stop the development," he said, "but I will make sure that our construction does as little damage as possible."

He was stunned by the rich

biodiversity that I showed him on the seagrass meadows at low tide, just off the main Forest City beachfront. He seemed determined to support the local fishing community's eco-tourism and seafood sales. Residents at Forest City are often sent reminders via their community's online chat groups to buy fresh from local fishermen.

He told me he has directed his hotel, communications and other project-management departments to work with community representatives on the promotion of local natural and cultural heritage, through tours offered by the community, or by showcasing local ecological knowledge and research outputs in the Forest City EcoMuseum. The access road to surrounding villages has also been

repaired, facilitating engagements with local small businesses and communities.

When SSM-FC conducted mangrove-planting events, it sent out invitations to Forest City residents and several turned up with children in tow. A number asked how often these programmes were run, and how they could get involved in other activities. When the school decided to do a beach cleanup in September, several of the same faces turned up to help.

Dr Maloberti told me that as he toured China engaging with potential buyers to tell them about the strengths of SSM-FC, most parents were attracted by the sustainability aspects of the project. The citizen science programmes and other environmental events were of key interest, as were links between the school, Forest City, and the local fishing community and its surrounding seas.

There is much more Forest City can do to enhance its value

proposition in sustainability. For one thing, the development was first pitched as a car-free, cycling-friendly development with elevated walkways and centralised parking facilities to keep it safe and pedestrian-friendly. There is little traffic, and buggy services ferry residents around, but the lack of pavements between the school and nearby apartments remains a bugbear.

Forest City could also examine how its buildings could be more habitable towards migratory species, following the lead of SSM-FC. Students and staff there encounter migratory birds when many fly into the windows of their buildings. One solution the school is working on is reflective stickers, a simple but effective means to warn birds of otherwise transparent glass windows.

Perhaps in integrating cities with nature, the Forest City developer should consult the community and Kelab Amani for local nature-based solutions to improve local ecology. They would

know what works best in the area, having done the work for almost 20 years.

Forest City could also include green concepts – green corridors and eco-bridges – in the development, which have proven successful in Singapore and other parts of South-east Asia.

LIFE COMES BACK

Human life, too, is returning to Forest City. There are many more lights on in apartments at night, according to SSM-FC staff who head to the beachfront pubs and cafes for a drink after work. Whenever I go to the island on weekends to check on habitats or the EcoMuseum, the water parks and swimming pools are full of Malaysian families.

Residents say there have been new investments, with repairs and overdue maintenance works ongoing in the second half of 2023.

It is heartening to see the pause in development allowing the

island to become part of the surrounding ecosystem – an unexpected positive, considering the environmental problems plaguing Forest City from the outset. But while the federal and state governments work to boost investments, the most appealing aspect of Forest City is its fresh sustainability drive.

Home-grown efforts to welcome and integrate the island's new residents with the local community through seafood sales, habitat tours and citizen science training are things few other developments can offer.

Much of the returning plant and animal life was not mentioned in the environmental impact assessment for Forest City. Their revival demonstrates how nature can recover if left alone. It is now up to the developer and residents to make sure they can thrive.

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