

Taking S'pore's sea wonders to the heartland

New non-profit group plans to showcase rich underwater life via talks, games and more

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After years of helping to restore Singapore's coral reefs and clearing marine litter from the fragile habitat, marine biologist Sam Shu Qin now wants to take the country's underwater wonders to the heartland.

Ms Sam, 35, formed a new non-profit group called Our Blue Spaces in March, which aims to make the less-visible marine life around the island-state more accessible to those who may not have had the chance to visit the nation's biodiversity-rich Southern Islands, such as the Sisters' Islands and Lazarus Island.

With the setting-up of the new outfit, Ms Sam plans to roll out creative programmes like "coral and cocktail" educational talks, marine-themed escape room games and dive expeditions, on top of conducting marine conservation sessions at firms and schools.

The aim, she told *The Sunday Times*, is to bring the nation's underwater environment to life for many Singaporeans who may not know about the richness of life in

the country's waters.

Despite their murkiness, Singapore's seas are home to a rich variety of marine life, such as more than 100 species of reef fish, about 200 species of sea sponges, and rare and endangered seahorses and giant clams.

Ms Sam's aspirations for Our Blue Spaces comes amid a "blue wave" in Singapore, with almost back-to-back announcements on ocean conservation rolled out over the past year.

These include the reopening of the Sisters' Islands Marine Park in October, the September launch of the country's first seagrass restoration project, as well as plans to create the country's second marine park, which were announced in May.

The Friends of Marine Park community, a network of volunteers, had been involved in the proposal to designate a second marine park in the southern part of Lazarus Island and the reef off Kusu Island. Ms Sam is a coordinator of the Friends of Marine Park community.

About 60 per cent of Singapore's reef area has been lost to land reclamation over the decades. Most of



Singapore's intact coral reefs are found in the Southern Islands, and plans are afoot to help restore some of these habitats.

In 2023, the country also announced a coral planting effort that will see 100,000 coral fragments being planted in degraded reef areas, among other suitable marine sites.

Ms Sam, an NUS College instructor, also wants young people to think more critically about Singapore's marine spaces.

As an example, she pointed to the need to strike a balance between conservation and development, given the competing needs for Singapore's limited sea space.

The marine community here is often involved in meetings with government agencies and other groups whenever there are proposed developments that may affect Singapore's marine habitats. These could include a fish farm or a land reclamation project.

Ms Sam aims to equip her students with knowledge to contribute constructively to such meetings. She is also planning to set up a youth arm under the Friends of Marine Park community to nurture a younger generation of marine custodians.

Our Blue Spaces builds on a seven-year-old community group she co-founded called Our Singapore Reefs, which is focused on cleaning up coral reefs and raising awareness about the nation's marine biodiversity.

With the help of diver volunteers, Our Singapore Reefs has cleared more than 11,000 pieces of rubbish from the local reefs since 2017, with finds ranging from plastic bottles to a Minnie Mouse plush toy.

The organisation also works with One*15 Marina in Sentosa Cove to maintain and plant corals at its coral garden patch. The other co-founder of Our Singapore Reefs is NUS lecturer Toh Tai Chong.

REELING IN THE YOUNG AND THE OLD

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MARINE BIOLOGIST SAM SHU QIN, whose passion for educating people about biodiversity has taken her to different "classrooms" – from yachts with children to a community centre where she conducted a marine lesson in Hokkien.

Marine biologist Sam Shu Qin, who set up non-profit Our Blue Spaces, plans to roll out creative programmes like "coral and cocktail" educational talks. ST PHOTO: JASON QUAH

protecting coasts from strong waves and sustaining fish populations, the colourful habitat faces many threats. Other than destructive fishing practices, rising sea surface temperatures caused by global warming also cause them to bleach.

The world is in the middle of the largest recorded global bleaching event, with 77 per cent of reefs worldwide exposed to bleaching-level heat stress since 2023. Singapore's corals have been affected as well, with 20 to 30 per cent of them still showing signs of bleaching.

Ms Sam said one of her first encounters with corals was during a mass bleaching event in 2016, driven by a marine heatwave. She was at Lazarus Island. "The corals were all white, it was like a ghost town. That made me realise that corals really need our help. They are so fragile," added Ms Sam.

Her passion for educating people about biodiversity has taken her to different "classrooms" – from yachts with children to a community centre where she conducted a marine lesson in Hokkien.

"The sea holds a lot of secrets. Knowledge is getting more accessible with the internet. But there are some groups who are still excluded, like younger people, older people. But they can also play a part in marine conservation," she said.

While coral reefs are crucial for

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