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Tighten legal ambiguity, protect more forests: Singapore conservationists

issue wishlist to government

Key asks include looking into having two new nature parks, along with explicit safeguards for the airspace above and earth under protected areas – after an upcoming subway line was allowed to run under gazetted forests years ago.



By [Liang Lei](#)

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Biodiversity experts have asked for two new nature parks to be considered near Singapore’s central forest reserve, in areas currently used for military training or earmarked for housing development, to provide refuge to critically endangered wildlife such as pangolins and langurs.

In a 175-page “[Singapore terrestrial conservation plan](#)”, conservationists also urged the government to extend protection of gazetted nature areas to the airspace above and subsoil underneath surface features, while reiterating calls for a law governing environmental impact assessments.



The report by some 40 contributors is billed as a guide for conservation policymaking in



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heavily urbanised Singapore, and a call for greater civic engagement. Under 0.3 per cent of the 735-square-kilometre city-state remains old-growth forests today, though parks and younger woods still shelter valuable wildlife.

National development minister Desmond Lee, speaking at a launch event on Sunday attended by over 150 people including many from conservation circles, said the report and recommendations serve as a very important resource on conserving natural heritage, and would be carefully studied.

“At the same time, the pressures on land use will grow on many fronts,” he said, pointing to issues such as housing, healthcare, jobs, education and preparing for climate change.

“Given our physical constraints, after exhausting our land intensification and recycling strategies, in maximising our use of land...there may be some greenfield sites that might be needed to meet our land use needs,” he said, adding that such developments would be subject to greater scrutiny as part of an environmental impact assessment (EIA) process.

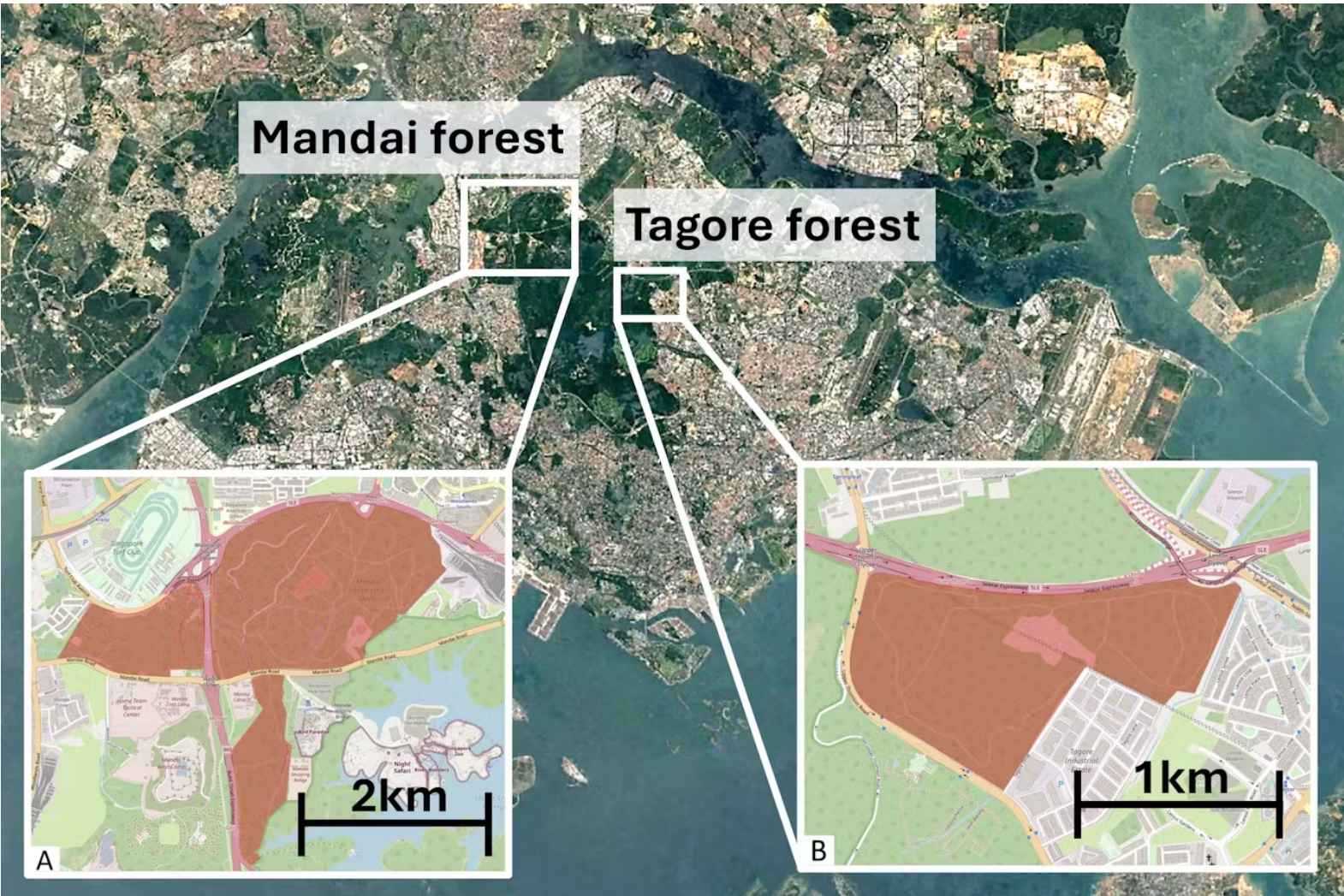
Mandai, Tagore Forests as “buffer zones”

The report asked that two existing woodlands, Mandai Forest and Tagore Forest, be studied for designation as nature parks. This would afford them greater legal protection against, for instance, animal trapping and land clearing.

Both plots are on the edge of Singapore's central forest reserve. The northern Mandai plot consists mainly of a 3.5km by 1.5km forest, along with a narrow two-kilometre extension to the south, skirting along a cluster of wildlife sanctuaries including the national zoo.

Parts of this plot are currently used for military training, while the government is also considering building a new service reservoir there.

The eastern Tagore forest, approximately 1.7km by 1km, is likewise used by the military and also zoned for residential development in the future.



Conservationists have suggested that Mandai and Tagore forests, specifically the areas highlighted red, be studied for protection under nature park status. Eco-Business graphics. Adapted from Google Earth, Singapore Terrestrial Conservation Plan.

Report editors Dr Andie Ang and Sankar Ananthanarayanan stressed that there was no outright call for new nature parks, rather a push for more research in the two forests to understand their biodiversity value.

These areas are thought to be “buffer zones” surrounding Singapore’s large central catchment nature reserve, “crucial refuges for rare wildlife like Sunda pangolins and Raffles’ banded langurs”, the report stated.

“We are aware that because of various land use needs in Singapore, we can’t just say all forest habitats should be protected. Rather, we highlighted these two areas as potentially very important, to be studied first,” said Ang, a primatologist and president of the Singapore arm of conservation group Jane Goodall Institute.

Beyond Mandai and Tagore, the report also recommended prioritising non-residential forests on Singapore’s offshore Pulau Ubin for protection, and to restore more pockets of degraded woodlands across the mainland.

Legal improvements

Singapore should also amend its laws to clarify that protected nature areas encompass the airspace above and subsoil below surface features, the report recommended. Protected spaces must not be used for any other purposes, it added.

The publication pointed to subway tunnels for an upcoming Cross Island Line that is to run under the central catchment nature reserve – first mooted a decade ago and expected to be completed in the early 2030s. The route had been adjusted to minimise nature impacts, but an alternate route outside the reserve had been rejected.

The current interpretation of conservation laws appears to allow earth under a nature reserve to be used for activities otherwise

barred, so long as it does not affect the biodiversity or enjoyment of the reserve above, the report noted.

It also reiterated a call for EIAs to be codified into law. Singapore currently has an EIA framework that conservationists worry does not go far enough. A new law should clearly state when studies are needed, discretionary or unnecessary, while setting standards for the process, the report stated.

Last month, when a similar call was raised in Parliament, senior minister of state for national development Tan Kiat How had said the government would monitor the effects of upgrades to its existing EIA framework before deciding on further steps. Detailed guidelines have been recently published while a centralised EIA management process is being piloted, Tan had noted.



There needs to be more clarity, via a law, on when environmental impact assessments are required for new developments to better protect nature, conservationists say. Image: Eco-Business/ Liang Lei.

In nine recommendations, the Singapore terrestrial conservation plan also called for more research into nature connectivity and easier access for fieldwork in often forested military areas, where there could be “incidental” biodiversity value. It asked for better data sharing and public education.

The report is heavy with scientific information, which Ananthanarayanan hopes can facilitate future civic engagements on conservation. He initiated the project after

attending government consultations where many advocates had opinions but did not have data to back up their arguments.

“So having a body of literature that says this is what we know, this is what we don’t, and these are our priorities, can help to better focus these conversations,” Ananthanarayanan said.

Southeast Asia is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world. Deforestation rates have gone down in recent years in Malaysia and Indonesia, but rapid urban development and agricultural expansion continues to eat away at pristine land.

In Singapore, species extinction rates in the past 200 years had been revised down from over 70 per cent to 37 per cent in a paper by the National University of Singapore earlier this year. The city-state has been planning more nature corridors to better connect nature spaces, and has a target to plant over a million trees this decade.

However, over 7,000 hectares of forests are earmarked for future development – [larger than its nature reserves and parks combined](#). Conservationists frequently call for safeguards when new developments are announced, sometimes meeting the government midway.

The report authors declined to say how many recommendations they feel the government would accept.

“I read the recommendations with an open mind and am still pondering categorising them as feasible, doable or wishful,” wrote emeritus professor Leo Tan, a veteran marine biologist, for an introduction to the report.

“My hope is that at least some of their recommendations will take flight,” Tan added.

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