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Environment & the Singapore Story: What Next?

By Choo Ruizhi

SYNOPSIS

As the Singapore government acts on the environmental impact of climate change, it is time to consider how the country's environmental histories fit into The Singapore Story. This has the potential to help Singaporeans better navigate an environmentally uncertain and volatile future.

COMMENTARY

ON 1 FEBRUARY 2021, the Singapore parliament formally declared climate change a global emergency, signalling the government's growing willingness to act on environmental issues of global consequence. Public awareness and civic activism have also dovetailed with the state's direction, as evidenced by recent outcries over the zoning of Dover Forest for residential use, and the accidental clearing of the Kranji woodland.

Two decades earlier, in May 1997, then-Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong launched the National Education programme, an initiative aimed at instilling a sense of national identity amongst younger Singaporeans. Its central tenets were anchored in what is commonly known today as 'the Singapore Story', a national narrative developed around key episodes in the nation's past.

The Singapore Story & Environmental History

'The Singapore Story' has since been regularly updated to reflect the country's evolving aspirations. The Story's most recent update was the Bicentennial Commemorations of 2019, charting the island's various transformations, from a geographically strategic seaport to a modern city-state. The 'Singapore Story' has thus come to reflect the city-state's changing perspectives and priorities.

As PM Lee observed in 2019, “we should treat climate change defences like we treat the SAF – with utmost seriousness...both the SAF and climate change defences are existential for Singapore. These are life and death matters”. This being so, it is perhaps time to think more deeply about how this multi-faceted adversary fits into Singapore’s Story. It is time for us to seriously consider Singapore’s environmental history, and how the natural environment has influenced the making of this nation.

History is not just about great men. While political histories may study how treaties and leaders affected empires, environmental history primarily explores how environmental factors (like plantations, pathogens or the climate) shaped civilisations. Environmental history thus also sits at the intersection of numerous disciplines like history, ecology, and economics, a quality which allows it to potentially yield fresh insights from even well-trodden topics.

In Singaporean history, the environment has figured largely as a footnote: whether in mentions of our geographically “strategic location”, or how land was reclaimed for industrialisation. Little has been said, however, about how these environmental factors interacted with Singaporean society.

Environmental issues in Singapore, moreover, have largely been appreciated through the lenses of more contemporary disciplines. It is time historians join these conversations with their analytical toolkits, because we are emerging into a historical moment where the environmental is becoming exigent; existential.

Singaporeans themselves have expressed a growing willingness to act. Surveys conducted in 2019 by the National Climate Change Secretariat indicate that a large majority of Singaporeans are willing to bear additional costs to reduce their carbon signature; over 95% supported Singapore’s shift to a low-carbon economy.

A deeper awareness of our historical relationships with nature will help Singaporeans better contextualise the sacrifices they may have to make, and to better navigate tomorrow’s environmental emergencies.

Why Environmental History is Useful

Infusing environmental history into the Singapore Story can help to connect contemporary issues of environmental salience with the deeper Singaporean past. Deforestation, drought, food insecurity, floods – these modern issues have numerous historical precedents locally, reminding us that *these things have happened, and can happen again*.

Firstly, environmental history can offer policymakers a wider range of options to consider and choose from. Past approaches may become relevant again; assumptions may be revisited in light of new historical evidence or changes in contemporary circumstances.

For instance, plans to raise pigs in high-rise farms were once contemplated by Singapore in the 1970s, but later shelved due to prohibitive technological costs. The recent opening of an eight-storey vertical fish farm locally shows how approaches formerly contemplated can become relevant again as contexts change.

As an island nation, Singapore's food, energy and water security are of paramount importance to its continued peace and prosperity. Understanding the history of our environmental insecurity will provide policymakers with a more contextualised appreciation of Singapore's present situation.

Environmental history may thus help experts recover broader datasets, alternative strategies and wider contexts to better understand and address an issue.

The Stories We Tell

Next, environmental history can also provide crucial additional analysis to existing concerns, by bringing previously unconsidered environmental factors into the conversation. Our understandings of crucial national episodes, like the Water Agreements between Singapore and Malaysia, may consequently be further enhanced.

The Agreements, signed in the 1965 Separation Agreement with Malaysia, guarantees Singapore's existence as a sovereign state. The matter, however, has also largely been framed as a resource access and control issue between both governments.

Environmental history, with its particular focus on human-nature interactions over time, can surface perspectives and processes previously overlooked by earlier researchers. For example, more granular analyses of colonial Singapore's water security can be done, or how Johor's Linggiu Reservoir became so entwined with Singaporean sovereignty.

How the two states' understandings of "water" have evolved over time, could generate more nuanced appreciations of these Agreements. Environmental history can hence deepen our understandings of national issues in ways current perspectives may simply be unequipped to.

Where Do We Go Next?

Finally, developing a coherent, baseline narrative about Singapore's environmental past now may also help to combat potential sources of misinformation which may arise as environmental activism in Singapore gains momentum. Any state-developed narrative will almost inevitably invite critique and contestation from citizens, but such processes will also help to strengthen and deepen Singaporeans' understandings of their pasts.

How did we get here? Over the centuries, storytellers and statesmen have offered diverse responses to this fundamental question. In 1997, the government formulated and sharpened its explanation for how Singapore became a nation-state. Over the years, this Story has evolved as the Republic reinvented itself.

The stories we tell can change the way we act. As the oceans rise and the planet warms, it is time again to rethink what stories we choose to tell about ourselves. It is perhaps by providing a more environmentally anchored answer to "how did we get here", by seeing more distinctly the nature in the Story, that we may be better placed to ask another fundamental question: "where are we going next?"

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