Study on life of ex-villagers on Southern Islands

Two-year project documents heritage and little-known stories from former islanders

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Singapore’s young islanders were such good swimmers, they would encourage people to visit the Southern Islands, to throw coins into its waters so that they would come to visit.

Former St John’s villager Mohamad Alam Gani, 69, said: “We had to dive in fast as the coconuts sank rapidly. We emerged with them in our hands or our mouths.”

Mr Alam, a former legends staff, said: “The currents were very strong and our elders would often stop us from jumping in. But swimming was in our blood and back then, there were no games or other activities. So after we finished our homework, we would drift off, take off our shirts – occasionally we wore our birthday suits – to play in the water.”

The lives of many villagers on St John’s and Lazarus Islands and Pulau Serangoon—now all linked by land—were intimately tied to the sea.

Their little-known stories are being unearthed by a research team led by cultural geographer Ham shoulder Shamus from the National University of Singapore (NUS). The project, supported by the National Heritage Board (NHB), includes oral history interviews which will lead to an exhibition, a workbook and a self-guided walking tour. The soft run of the tour will be launched next month.

The islands are now under the Singapore Land Authority (SLA), Sensa Development Corporation was the managing agent from 1976 to 1977.

In 2018, the Singapore Tourism Board had once again proposed plans to transform the islands into a resort.

With assurance chief executive of policy and community, Mr Alvin Tan, said it supported the project because “it focuses on the little-known stories”.

He added: “The project adopts a participatory approach involving former residents which we believe will yield useful insights into life on these islands in the past.”

Dr Hamzah said the islands, now devoid of permanent occupants, were once home to thriving communities. He said the islanders called Lazarus Island was once home to 40 Malay families from the 1850s to 1950s. Each family had 12 members on average.

There was also one Chinese and one Indian family living there. According to the 1957 census, there were altogether 257 residents living there, with 15 Chinese, three Indians and one Pakistani.

Dr Hamzah said the island has a longer history tied to the swang lost, or sea nomads, who were among the original inhabitants of Singapore.

He said the first known reference of the island was in 1821 in St John’s Island (8) of 1821 in St John’s Island

(2). The new kitchen, with induction cooker plus new pots and cooking ware. Tables will also be replaced.

Left: Former St John’s village Mohamad Alam Gani, 69, left, showing NUS Dr Hamzah Shamus some old photos on his cellphone.

PHOTOS: GIN TAY, GENE CHONG

St John’s Island campsite upgraded

Camper can expect refreshed accommodation facilities on St John’s Island. The Singapore Land Authority (SLA), which manages and maintains the island, has upgraded a campsite there, as well as a colonial-era bungalow.

With a capacity of about 50 people, the campsite – one of five such facilities there – has 10 tent platforms, a raised flat platform for campers to sleep on with their sleeping bags, as well as a digital smart lock system.

In the kitchen, dated stove tops and gas canisters have been replaced with portable induction cookers. Meanwhile, the new lock system will allow campers to access the campsite using a one-time password sent to their mobile phones.

The four-bedroom bungalow, with a capacity of about 10 people, underwent some structural repairs.

The authority had cordoned off the island’s campsite, lagoon and holiday bungalow area last year because traces of asbestos were discovered in construction debris nearby.

SLA said later that month that it planned to reopen the island’s campsite in mid-2019 after upgrading and maintenance works were done in keeping with the rustic nature of the space, which has been completed. The asbestos removal efforts were completed at the end of last year.

The new amenities and upgraded features could be rolled out to the island’s other campers if campers give positive feedback on the changes.

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There is less information on the inhabitants, especially those on Lazarus Island, which was popular even before St John’s Island became significant.”

The two-year-long project will conclude at the end of the year. It follows a slew of projects which have emerged over the years to document Singapore’s islands.

Last year, The Straits Times reported on a team from the NUS Department of Architecture which documented the traditional construction methods of lamping horizons at Pulau Ubin.

Dr Hamzah said his team hopes to make recommendations on future plans for the islands. Last month, it put out a public survey seeking views on what the islands could be used for, among other things.

Dr Santia Lam-Knot, a team member and a postdoctoral fellow at the Arts Research Institute, said: “If they can continue their function as a place for recreation, that would be good. However, there should also be better amenities and transportation for Singaporeans wishing to access these island spaces.”

The Straits Times understands the SLA, which manages the islands, is working to maintain the rustic nature of the islands.

The team will be giving an informal assessment of the structures on the islands to highlight those worth preserving. Among these are the St John’s Island English School buildings, former quarantine facilities and colonial-era vestiges.