BOOK REVIEW

The Singapore Red Data Book: Threatened Plants and Animals of Singapore.

There is a surprising diversity of life remaining in and around Singapore, but the dramatic developments of the last few decades have drastically reduced the abundance of many of the constituent species, and have caused at least local extinctions for a fair number (such as 74 of the total recorded 215 resident bird species). This fascinating publication documents the scale of the problem and should provide food for thought for the island’s decision makers.

While there are many international and national Red Data Books, few have been written for tropical regions, and probably none can boast the depth and breadth of the book now available for Singapore. This is due, as indicated in the Introduction, to the fact that Singapore has a very privileged place in Southeast Asian natural history, quite disproportionate to its small size, with many renowned scientists having studied its flora and fauna over the last 170 years. The text makes the point well that unless species taxonomy is well studied, conservation plans may be misdirected, with perhaps fatal consequences for some species. In this regard, it is noteworthy that many new species have been discovered, and new records made, in recent years: such as the torrent prawn, Temasek shrimp, sea grass shrimp, swamp forest crab, and masked swamp frog.

Some 1800 plants and 900 animals are listed in the book as threatened but only 255 species are dealt with in detail, each being afforded a page and (in virtually all cases) a well-reproduced black and white photograph or line drawing. The coverage among the groups is uneven: each of the 19 threatened mammals is afforded a page, but only 6 of the 123 threatened ferns, 28 of the 62 threatened molluscs, 26 of the 57 threatened crabs (a relatively high ratio, perhaps a reflection of the passion of the senior editor), and 14 of the 28 threatened reptiles. However, the book does not pretend to be exhaustive, and there is more than enough to give the reader the general picture. For each selected species details are given of status, description, habitat and ecology, distribution, threats, scientific interest and potential value, as well as conservation measures taken and proposed. The threat and potential value, as well as conservation measures taken and proposed. The threat categories are modifications of the old IUCN categories, rather than the new and rather complicated Mace-Lande system, but this scarcely lessens the book’s use in any way.

The entries are more interesting and less repetitive than one might expect for a work of this type. There are also expressions of humour (such as the furry ‘Paddington Bear crab’) and frustration. An example of the latter concerns the plight of a spectacular firefly (a beetle), the natural habitat of which is some mangrove trees within a development zone just outside a bird reserve. The reserve authorities see no interest in securing a mangrove area “because trees have an annoying habit of getting between birds and bird-watchers”. Meanwhile the Singapore Zoo is hoping to establish a colony in its existing grounds because of their great tourist potential. “Somewhere, somehow, someone surely ought to find the obvious solution.”
My only criticism is that I would have found some form of analysis interesting. It would have been possible to include a quantification of trends, brief thoughts on scenarios for the future, relative importance of threats, national conservation planning etc. That apart, there is clearly much here which will be of interest to residents of Singapore, but others with broader natural history horizons will find much of use, and it is certainly a source I shall turn to often.

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