

BOOK REVIEW

Chek Jawa Guidebook. Tan, R. & A. Yeo (eds.), 2003, (website: www.wildsingapore.com.sg), in association with The Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, The National University of Singapore. (website: rmbr.nus.edu.sg). Published by Simply Green, Singapore (website: www.simplygreen.co.sg). Photographs by Alan Yeo. Containing more than 400 full-colour photographs with over 100 explanatory diagrams. iv + 219 pages of jargon-free text with worksheet elements. SGD 18.00. ISBN 981-04-8832.

I mentally groaned when Peter Ng slid *Chek Jawa guidebook* across my bench space at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and asked me to review it for *The Raffles Bulletin of Zoology*. My attitude was simply due to my own inadequacies - just how does an outsider communicate the significance of this pocket-sized book on a single sheet of A4 paper? Let's start with the question: what exactly is Chek Jawa? Well it is the easternmost coastline of a small island named Pulau Ubin, off the mainland of Singapore, in the Johor Straits, at the mouth of the Johor river (pages 6-7). The biological treasures of the shallow tidal flats off the village of Chek Jawa lay hidden and protected by sandbars. Until as recently as 2001 that is when the Singaporean Government announced advanced plans to reclaim this coastline, which basically means the Urban Redevelopment Authority wanted to bury it in sand, tonnes of sand. Chek Jawa became a focal point, not of extreme protesting greenies, but reasoned ordinary citizens that were not prepared to lose more of its dwindling natural heritage. A transect study conducted on the 22 August 2001 along the Chek Jawa coastline identified seven species of seagrass and 28 species of seaweed. At the same time, staff from the Raffles Museum conducted a number of outings for the public before the area was lost for ever. Lectures were organised to educate the public and articles written for *Nature Watch* and *Asian Geographic*. Ria Tan and Alan Yeo, together with many other supporters worked tirelessly to save a small but beautiful stretch of coastline. Christmas came early in December 2001, on the 21st to be precise, a reprieve came just days before the reclamation work was due to start. This was unprecedented considering the amount of time and money already spent on the proposed project. The beach at Chek Jawa will be left in peace for at least ten years.

Chek Jawa may masquerade as a guidebook on the outside,

but for the adventurous I suggest you search the tome from cover to cover because there can be found all the jewels of the east. The pages literately ooze collaboration and in a nutshell it is biodiversity of the people, by the people for the people. There is obviously a strong community spirit projected from within. Much thought was given to the format and presentation of the book, so much so that I understand that publication was delayed for over a year to ensure that it was user friendly (jargon-free text!). Ria and Alan have certainly achieved this and in my opinion got it right. The penned illustrations, mostly by Ria, are magnificent combining accurate biological fact and humour with simplicity, while Alan has supported the text with a multitude of excellent natural history photographs. Further contributions have come from the biodiversity graduate students of the NUS Department of Biological Sciences, staff of The Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, and various other experts and volunteers, who have all breathed a unique kind of life into the guidebook. For example page 19 is entitled "Preparing for your visit" [to Chek Jawa]. Practical advice is given; wear a hat if it's a sunny day, bring water, don't walk barefoot and much more. Further I liked the two pages comprising "What's that?!". A considerable amount of thought has been given to explaining the complex subject of taxonomy. This text here is not the stodgy pudding of school dinners; instead it is well thought out, light enjoyable reading and comprises the real ingredients of further education. The project editors are to be congratulated on their fine achievement. In fact, by the time my review is published, *Chek Jawa Guidebook* will have received the Environment book award sponsored by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) at the *Asian Geographical* "Celebrate the Sea" event in Kuala Lumpur, August 2003. It is well deserved.

Chek Jawa is alive at present, but remember it is only under a temporary reprieve.

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