
Protecting Chek Jawa: the politics of conservation and memory at the edge of a nation

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Introduction: the reprieve at Chek Jawa

In December 2001, conservationists in Singapore scored a rare victory when they convinced the government to stop land reclamation at Tanjung Chek Jawa, probably the last coastal flats in the country. Only one square kilometre in area, Chek Jawa cradles six ecosystems and is situated at the edge of Pulau Ubin, itself a rustic island of slightly more than ten square kilometres in size at the north-eastern edge of the country (Fig. 20.1). It was no small feat. The conservation of disorderly wilderness was not a consideration of the developmental state, which preferred an orderly city in a manicured garden. The last time conservationists won a reprieve for nature was in 1992, when the government shelved plans to clear rainforests to develop a golf course in the Central Catchment Reserve. Through the 1990s, Ubin was a focus of contention between conservationists aiming to protect pockets of nature areas and a technocratic government planning to build a housing estate. Caught in this tussle was a nostalgic public that saw Ubin as the last *kampung* (Malay: village) in Singapore. In mid 2001, the government put aside its plans for Ubin in recognition of public sentiment, but indicated that land reclamation along its eastern shoreline would proceed as planned.

In the second half of 2001, a public campaign to save Chek Jawa gathered momentum. Independent studies were conducted, letters written, petitions signed, talks given, stories published and walks organized to draw public

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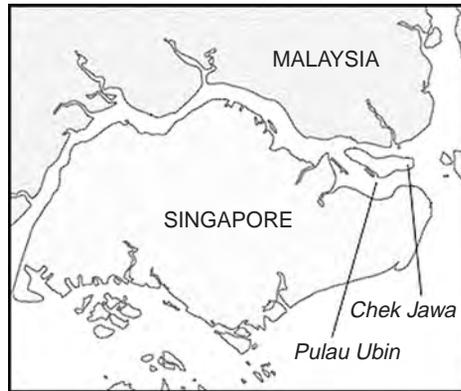


Figure 20.1. Map of Singapore showing the location of Pulau Ubin and Chek Jawa.

attention to a little-known natural site (*Straits* 2001). At one walk, conservationists guided over one thousand visitors, an assembly of citizens unheard of in a country where a public gathering of five people or more required a police permit. Even the Minister of National Development visited the site to see what the excitement was all about. The bulldozers had already gone through Kampung Melayu, Surau and Chek Jawa, three villages in the area, and flags were posted to mark the final doze to clear the area. To the pleasant surprise of conservationists, the execution was stayed at the last moment. Recently, the government announced a \$10million project to build a boardwalk, complete with lookout platforms, a seven-storey viewing tower and a visitor and research centre (*Straits* 2005).

This augurs well for Chek Jawa, as two other areas that were established as ‘nature reserves’ in 2001, Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve and Labrador Nature Reserve, began their career in the same manner (Ministry of the Environment 2002:11–12): the government promised a stay on destruction contingent on developmental demands and placed the sites to be managed by park authorities for local ecotourism. Protected nature sites fall into two categories in Singapore. The first are ‘nature areas’ that are conserved as potential national parks in the state’s land-use plan but are not accorded legal protection. The second are ‘nature reserves’, fully fledged national parks given legal protection under the National Parks Act. There are fifteen nature areas and four nature reserves, which, in addition to the two mentioned above, include the biodiversity-rich Bukit Timah and Central Catchment Reserves. They make up a total of 3130 hectares or 5% of Singapore’s land area. By all signs, Chek Jawa is a national park in the making. How do we explain this rare ‘major policy u-turn’ (*Straits* 2002a), the concession to politically powerless conservationists by a resolutely developmental state with an iron grip on the political process and the land?