

Interview with Subaraj Rajathurai

We gain insights into Pulau Ubin's past, present and future from nature conservationist Subaraj Rajathurai, a Friends of Ubin Network (FUN) member. With more than 35 years of field experience, Subaraj is also the founder of Strix Wildlife Consultancy.

What sparked your interest in nature education/awareness on Pulau Ubin?

Since I was young, I had an interest in nature and wildlife. Back then, opportunities to work with wildlife in Singapore were available only at the zoo or bird park but my passion was more towards working outdoors in the wild. Ultimately, I decided to nurture my interest by spending time outdoors in different parts of Singapore. I was out in the field five days a week on my own after National Service, covering many areas, including Pulau Ubin.

I started my forays to Pulau Ubin in 1982, exploring and camping with a few friends, waking up to the calls of Straw-headed Bulbuls and many other birds. Ubin was different back in those days; the village scene was vibrant with activity from the quarries and local kampungs. I brought groups out to see birds and observe wildlife, and it was one of the most rewarding things to see the joy in their eyes as I shared my passion.

Ubin gives a different perspective because it isn't about nature alone but also heritage and culture. Touring Ubin is popular with many, especially for the older generation because to them it feels like coming home. To the younger generation, a trip to Ubin was an eye opener. Gradually, visitors form personal connections to the areas they visited on the island and we gain support to keep the place as is.

How has Pulau Ubin evolved in the last few years?

The Ubin community was worried about development pressure on the island. It was a pleasant surprise when the announcement about The Ubin Project was made, to sustain the island's rustic and natural charm. Hope was then rekindled to turn Ubin into something that is even better than before getting all the communities to work together with the common vision.

Having been involved in nature conservation on the island since 1982 (that's 37 years!), I've developed long associations with some of the villagers, whom I've known since I was a teenager. We should keep engaging the people who live here and involve them in whatever way we can.

While some natural areas have been lost over the years, we have managed to turn the tide by maintaining a close working relationship with all stakeholders, like NParks, NGOs, nature groups and academics. FUN helps to drive this close relationship and it does make a difference for the future of Ubin.

For more information on Pulau Ubin, visit www.ubin.sg or contact us at nparks_pulau_ubin@nparks.gov.sg



What is your aspiration for the next generation of nature enthusiasts?

The next generation is better informed and better connected than older generations. When I first started, the nature groups had to struggle to get our ideas across to the decision makers. Today, ministers and decision makers seek your opinion, they want dialogue. The legacy from my generation is that we helped create greater consciousness for biodiversity and nature conservation – from being an afterthought to being an important factor to be considered and incorporated in policies. My hope is for the next generation to take it from there and run further with it.

In Memorial

Subaraj passed on peacefully on 22 October 2019. It was our privilege to have had this interview with Subaraj in September at Changi Village. He was a key member of FUN, a passionate advocate for nature conservation, and an inspiration to young and old alike. His many contributions to The Ubin Project have borne fruit in several initiatives.

Thank you, Subaraj... you will be dearly missed.

Ubin Tides



Balik Kampung 2019: Pesta Raya@Ubin

Pesta Raya@Ubin is now a significant part of Pulau Ubin's history! Thanks to the National Parks Board (NParks) and Friends of Ubin Network (FUN), over 350 residents and former residents reunited at their island home to celebrate Hari Raya Puasa on 16 June 2019.

It was extremely heartwarming to witness so many friends and neighbours catching up with one another after losing touch for years. With special arrangements made for free bumboats and taxis, former residents made their way to the Malay kampung in droves for the celebration. Special thanks to Accessible Ubin for making it possible for our wheelchair-bound friends to join in the fun!



Selamat Hari Raya Aidilfitri from the descendants of Ubin!

Ubin residents opened up their homes and whipped up delicious food for all to enjoy. The entire Malay kampung saw many lively and exciting activities taking place, with traditional games, ketupat weaving, a photo booth and traditional Malay arts performances.

To wrap up the celebrations, everyone gathered at the Assembly Area for a bountiful feast under a beautiful display of warm-white lights – a very nostalgic experience for many. We were also blessed to be dining under the full moon that night!



Residents were treated to the melodious voices of our Dikir Barat performers.



Welcome home, former residents (and their loved ones) of Kampong Sungei Durian!



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Unearthing Ubin's Archaeological Heritage

Archaeology Defined

Archaeology is the study of material culture from our past – things that our predecessors left behind. Archaeologists look for tell-tale signs of past human activity such as artefacts and changes to the landscape.

One of the last frontiers of a pre-urbanised world, Pulau Ubin presents a unique opportunity to study a past that is increasingly scarce in today's highly developed Singapore.

From December 2017 to February 2019, a team from ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute conducted a three-season archaeological survey at Pulau Ubin. The team explored the island to identify archaeological remains and sites, and brought back some exciting findings!

Investigation 1:

Village Households and Their Practices

The team wanted to explore the interactions between homeowners and the environment on the island, so it picked a vacant single-storey timber residence – No. 846P in Kampong Melayu to study. The study included a detailed recording of the homestead and the area around it, and the patterns in domestic refuse disposal and food remains. Kitchen refuse that was discovered provided a glimpse into the diets of the residents.



House No. 846P at Kampong Melayu was one of the sites surveyed by the team.



Food remains, like shellfish, allow researchers to study the diet of the villagers in the past.

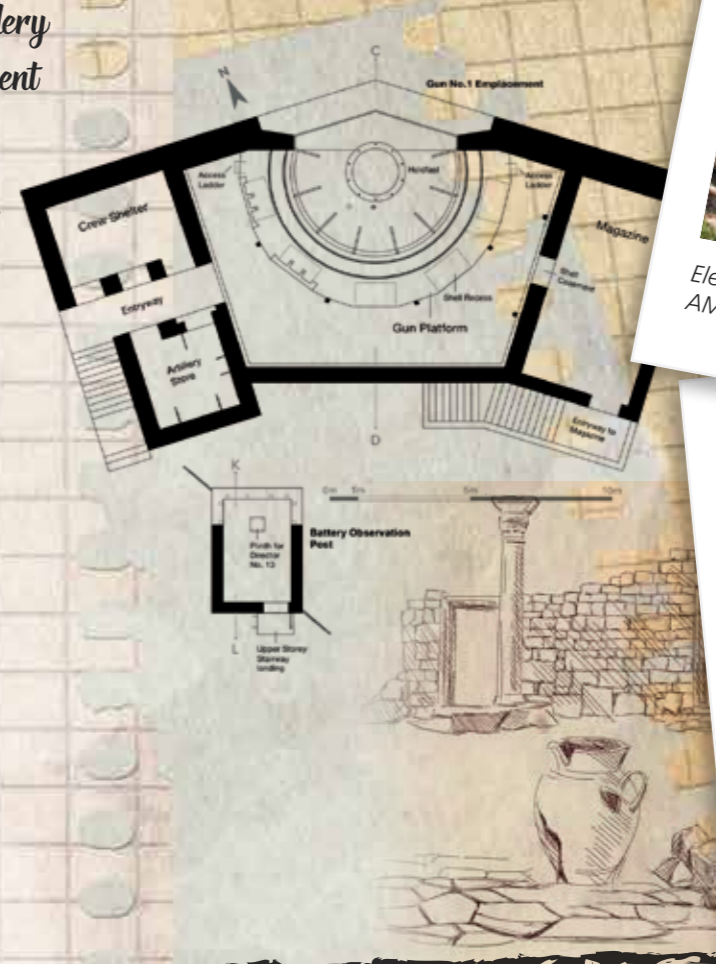


Field crew at work in the vacant homestead.

Investigation 2:

WWII Coastal Artillery Weapons and Equipment

During World War II, Pulau Ubin played an important part in military defence. As part of a chain of fortifications surrounding Singapore, an Anti-Motor Torpedo Boat (AMTB) gun battery was constructed on the northern coast of Pulau Ubin overlooking the Straits of Johor. Located within the National Police Cadet Corps' Camp Resilience, the site comprised two gun positions, fire direction towers, ammunition stores, searchlight posts and a power generator room. The team surveyed the boundaries of the AMTB battery and its relationship with the nearby village of Kampong Bahru.



Electric searchlight emplacements at the AMTB gun battery.



The archaeology team investigated a World War II-era latrine.

Investigation 3:

A 19th-century Municipal Granite Quarry

Pulau Ubin is also known as 'Granite Island', as Ubin is old Malay for 'hard stone' or 'granite'. Back in the day, granite extraction, along with agriculture and fish farming, was one of the island's principal industries.

The history of the granite extraction industry goes back to as early as the 1840s, where the East India Company began operating government quarries. The locations of these early municipal quarries are not entirely clear, and most of them would likely be subsumed into the larger operations of the 20th century. A former quarry site located to the east of Sungei Ubin may be a remnant from the 19th century – the site was a small-scale quarry that was abandoned prior to 1940, or possibly as early as 1900.

To uncover more information, the team went onsite to survey and map evidence demonstrating various stages of granite processing.

What's in the Works

While fieldwork was completed earlier in the year, the team is still busy researching and interpreting the findings. A broad range of work is underway, from archival research to unearth more clues from historical records and documents on past site usage, to studying artefacts collected from the field. The surveys so far have demonstrated that Pulau Ubin is a treasure trove of archaeological remains and sites, and much of the island remains unexplored.

This article is contributed by Lim Chen Sian, Archaeologist at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.