

## Mapping Pulau Ubin's living communities

This beloved island continues to surprise with fresh findings on its evolving richness

By Yang Vicki | 23 Oct 2015

The teasing of neighbours on Pulau Ubin already begins at the waters across the island, at Changi Point Ferry Terminal. A former Ubin resident and current boatman in his 50s looks bewilderedly at a press release in his hands and sputters at a profile of a current resident, "The crab-catcher not originally from Ubin *lah!* Why interview him?" Then, as if unable to help himself, he asks curiously, "Who else on Ubin is being interviewed?"



The banter over the origins of each islander or boatman continues even on the bumboat as it chugs towards Ubin. Another boatman and his assistant reveal that one used to live on Ubin and the other on Pulau Tekong. It seems like on an island village, everyone's family trees are imprinted on each other's minds, and even those who moved to Ubin more than 20 years ago are considered 'new' arrivals.

### The stirring village

The slightest of these visitor movements are even noticed by the non-original residents of Ubin. Mr Quek Kim Kiang is a former resident of Punggol who has lived on Ubin for more than two decades, catching and selling crabs for a living.

"I can catch two to six crabs a day but the catch is lessening each day," says the 63-year old. "More and more people have been coming to catch them in February and March and even when they are only at 100 grams, so by June or July there will be none left! Personally the smallest crabs I catch must be at least 300 grams," he grouches. Nevertheless, he is keen to display his catch from the mangrove swamps now, pulling away the top of a Styrofoam box to reveal three massive crabs to us 'mainlanders'.

Today, Ubin serves for many of the mainlanders – as opposed to the islanders – as a weekend getaway in terms of both time and place. Its wooden kampong houses at the mouths of forests and along bike trails are predecessors to our towering Housing Development Board flats. But the lines between Ubin natives, new neighbours and visitors aren't that divisive considering the stirring of community activities on Ubin and the formation of new social ties between mainlanders and islanders. Behind the box of rather active crabs in Mr Quek's front yard, for example, is a preliminary greenhouse that Mr Quek has been working on with visiting volunteers to grow plants in an ecologically sensitive way.

While there are only 38 residents officially living on the island, the image of a distant island as an attraction is popular and channeled through contemporary events such as Ubin Day, an annual large-scale community event to introduce and celebrate the wonders of the place to the public. With the help of volunteers from 34 organising groups, as well as the villagers themselves, this open house of sorts this year had 1,600 participating in activities on Ubin, such as mangrove kayaking, night walks, guided tours, birdwatching and photography exhibitions.





Such events that push Ubin as an attraction to preserve and enjoy, is a notion that several island folk understand as relevant to the future of Ubin. "When we were children and Singapore was still underdeveloped, Ubin was seen as invisible – whatever you want to do, you do," says Choo, a 60-year old Ubin native who was involved in the facilitation of the event. But while he sighs with fatigue at the memory of the momentous efforts of the event, he surmises, "We were all so busy! But having people coming here is good. Introducing Ubin to them can attract people now and in the future, and also earn for the businesses here some money."

#### Between the two islands

These are but a few examples of the self-initiated and collaborative activities that have been arising in Ubin. Beneath Ubin's laidback vibe, runs a thriving stream of active relations between the island and the bigger island-city downstream – that's one of the findings of the ongoing cultural mapping project under the aegis of the National Heritage Board (NHB), first suggested by the Singapore Heritage Society.



The research project builds on previous documentation efforts by the NHB, and aims to chronicle the heritage of Ubin, including the social relations and histories between former and current islanders. Commissioned by the NHB for this purpose, ethnographer Dr Vivienne Wee and her team of five researchers and a few interns from the National University of Singapore (NUS) History Department and Temasek Polytechnic have gone back and forth between the two islands since April 2015.

"Everyone says Ubin is a declining society, but it was only after our research that we realised that [Ubin] was not individuals living in isolation; there are hubs of vast social networks extending even to Malaysia," says Dr Wee, citing the "stakeholders" as mainland visitors, interest groups such as mountain bikers, and religious festival-goers from across the border. "They are liaising with the residents in unique ways. That's why the title of our project is mapping the living community heritage of Ubin, which is a shared heritage of not just Ubin people but all Singaporeans."





To Dr Wee and her team, what emerges from a prolonged period of time spent on Ubin is a sense of rejuvenation. This spirit is significant because it includes the transmission of knowledge to non-Ubin folks, as well as the young generation.

"We have to value the knowledge people have as custodians of not just Ubin culture, but a way of life that no longer exists in Singapore," says Dr Wee. She cites the example of Quek's use of the traditional hooking method to catch crabs, involving a long metal stick with a hook at the end of it. The trick, he says, is to hook the crabs out of their breathing holes in the mangrove swamp without destroying any limbs.

That rare knowledge is now being passed down to a nine-year old boy from the mainland who visits Quek regularly and is keen to learn. "I gave him an ultimatum – 'You have to pass your exams then you can come and find me. If you fail, you can't come!'" laughs Quek.

But even if there are few like the young crab-catching apprentice, such knowledge is being tirelessly archived under the cultural mapping project for future generations. The research work is expected to end in December, or early 2016, along with a 20-minute documentary on the Ubin residents.

According to Alvin Tan, assistant chief executive of policy and development at NHB, the research findings will be shared with stakeholders such as heritage and nature NGOs, and the Friends of Ubin Network, which includes government agencies such as the National Parks Board, Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), and the Ministry of National Development. "We are planning to use the research findings and come up with sensitive strategies to enhance and preserve the rustic charms of Ubin," says Mr Tan.



#### **The generosity of an island**

Such strategies are exactly what a number of the young generation have proposed in the extensive *Naturing Ubin* project carried out by over 300 second-, third-, fourth-year and Masters students of the NUS Architecture Department.

First mooted by URA to NUS, The project was part of the department's academic programme to engage the students in sensing, exploring and conceptualising possibilities for Ubin, after having done the necessary work of understanding the environment and everyday life of Ubin. The projects can be categorised under three masterplans, each with a spotlight on a different aspect of Ubin: place-based, which focuses on the social spirit and interactivity of the community; eco-based, which comprises designs around Ubin's biodiversity and natural environment; and culture-based, which revolves around the culture and heritage of Ubin.



"The idea was to put these ideas out on the table and let the public and stakeholders react to them," explains Dr Tan Beng Kiang, Senior Lecturer at the Department of Architecture. As such, 36 student projects were exhibited at The URA Centre from May to June, and their designs published in a book, *Naturing Ubin: Three Masterplans*.

The students too have become stakeholders. In the book's foreword written by then-Minister of State for National Development, Mr Desmond Lee, wrote of the students' efforts: "Their diversity of views and depth of imagination add yet another dimension to the trove of suggestions that we have received from other segments of the public thus far."

The student projects, even if part of a school assignment, speak of a newfound appreciation of Ubin's multiplicity. "From the conversations with the students, they realise it's the last piece of intact space we have that is not developed with a lot of tall buildings, and they appreciate it," says Dr Tan. As such, a number of projects suggest dwellings that serve as educational or learning centres on aspects of the richness that is Ubin.



For example, Dr Tan points out that on the mainland, *kampung* life can now only be witnessed in Kampong Lorong Buangkok, farms only in the Kranji countryside, and mangroves in Sungei Buloh. Ubin's heritage also includes its reflection of Singapore's past economic development, now represented in the disused fisheries and granite quarries dotting the landscape. "If you want to plan an education programme, you can teach [students] history, heritage, and nature all in one place. It's what we identify as so unique," she continues.



The continual work behind the scenes by these disparate groups with the villagers proves that Ubin still has much to offer and surprise in the future, and even those who have lived here for long know this. On a return trip from Ubin, yet another grizzly boatman surmises in conversation, "We have to preserve what Ubin is now and also consider the older people who live there, but we have to look forward."

Share your Ubin stories with NUS on their [facebook](#) or you can check out their [Naturing Ubin app](#), the first app on everything you need to know about this island.

Also view [Life on Ubin](#), NHB's video showing life on the island through the personal experiences of Mdm Wang Xiao San, the owner of the Ah Ma Drink Stall.