

# Reviewing Singapore's Environmental Scorecard

by Leong Wen Shan



**“We had a clear vision of providing a clean, green and good living environment.”**

Loh Ah Tuan, a former deputy CEO of Singapore's National Environment Agency (NEA), described Singapore's early efforts in environmental protection at the CLC lecture, “Environment Sustainability — The Singapore Journey”.

Tracing to the 1970s, Mr Loh said the period was characterised by rapid industrialisation, urban resettlement and a population spike.

Fortunately, the city's political leaders gave as much importance to environmental protection as it did economic development and social progress — ensuring environmental infrastructure, legislation and enforcement alongside the country's industrialisation, said Mr Loh. This was also the time when the government embarked on Singapore River's landmark clean-up.

Today, Singapore's environmental scorecard is said to be less than stellar.



Isabella Loh, Chairperson for the non-governmental organisation Singapore Environment Council, pointed to Singapore's high waste per capita, which currently exceeds that of Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong.

"As early as 1995, South Korea and Taiwan have been practising a 'volume-fee' waste system, where consumers are charged for waste disposal," Ms Loh shared. This has successfully helped "correlate waste management with recycling in people's minds."

Liak Teng Lit, Chairman of the NEA, made this candid remark:

"Honestly, Singapore is mediocre. Among first-world cities, we're average. If we talk about sustainability, we pale in comparison to other cities... With regard to cleanliness and recycling... we have an army of cleaners.

"The government has done too much," he said, noting that Singapore's environmental transformation into a "clean and green" city was mostly driven by the state.

All three speakers emphasised the need for behavioural change, where consumption habits have to be curbed.

A clear example is the pervasive use of plastic bags in Singapore — from supermarkets to food centres — that often end up as litter despite deterrents like fines.

Behavioural changes are best achieved through the "long and painful process of education." Mr Loh said it was perhaps time to revive public campaigns to drive the message of reduce, reuse and recycle. Singapore needs "to get true sociologists, psychologists and educationists to work on such campaigns," he said.

Mr Liak added that "the government is too responsive... and the civil service reacts everytime someone complains." This has also taken the responsibility away from citizens in protecting our environment.

The speakers encouraged members of the audience, comprising civil servants and non-government actors, to “dream big” and “don’t think about what bosses like or want.”

“Too many people today focus on avoiding failure. The focus should instead be on making great things happen,” urged Mr Liak. “Civil servants need to persuade politicians to do the right thing, that’s where the value is.”

# About the Speakers



**SPEAKER**

## **Mr Loh Ah Tuan**

Member, Panel of Experts, Centre for Liveable Cities (CLC)

Mr Loh Ah Tuan joined the Singapore Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources about 35 years ago, retiring in 2007. He served as the Director-General for Environmental Protection and Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the National Environment Agency (NEA), and held portfolios in environmental planning, environmental pollution control, integrated solid waste management and environmental public health.



**SPEAKER**

## **Mr Liak Teng Lit**

Chairman, National Environment Agency (NEA)

Group Chief Operating Officer, Perennial Real Estate Holdings Ltd

Chief Executive Officer, Perennial Healthcare Pte. Ltd

Liak was the Chief Executive Officer of Alexandra Health, which provides healthcare services for some 700,000 people living in the north of Singapore. A pharmacist by training, he was involved in the restructuring of major hospitals including The National University Hospital, Kandang Kerbau Hospital and Singapore General Hospital. He was also the former chairman of the Public Hygiene Council, and led the launch of the Keep Singapore Clean Movement in 2012.



**SPEAKER**

## **Ms Isabella Loh**

Chairman, Singapore Environment Council (SEC)

Ms Isabella Loh has been the Chairman of the Singapore Environment Council, a nongovernment organisation that partners communities, business and governments to achieve urban sustainable developments in Singapore and the region, since 2008. She was previously the President and CEO of SembCorp Environmental Management Pte Ltd from 1999 to 2005.

# About the Speakers



**MODERATOR**

## **Prof Paulin Straughan**

Sociologist, National University of Singapore (NUS)

A/P Paulin Tay Straughan has a Ph.D. (Sociology) from the University of Virginia, USA. She is Deputy Head of the Department of Sociology and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences (FASS) at the National University of Singapore. Her research includes issues on aging and population, work and family, as well as health. She was Principal Consultant for the Sociological Study on Littering in Singapore, commissioned by NEA in 2009.

## About CLC

The Centre for Liveable Cities was set up in 2008 by the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, based on a strategic blueprint developed by Singapore's Inter-Ministerial Committee on Sustainable Development. Guided by its mission to distil, create and share knowledge on liveable and sustainable cities, the Centre's work spans four main areas - Research, Capability Development, Knowledge Platforms and Advisory. The CLC Lecture Series is a platform for urban experts to share their knowledge with other practitioners. For more information, please visit us at <http://www.clc.gov.sg>

---

© 2017 Centre for Liveable Cities

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the Centre for Liveable Cities.