

# Protect mangroves and economic growth

EXPERTS should study whether more of Singapore's mangrove forests are worth protecting under conservation laws, said Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Yaacob Ibrahim yesterday.

He said the National Parks Board (NParks) and university researchers need to evaluate whether it is possible to preserve mangroves without threatening economic development.

Dr Yaacob was responding to questions from *The Straits Times* during the launch of a new book about local mangroves.

Singapore has lost 90 per cent of its mangroves since independence, and only one site has been gazetted for protection: the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve on the island's north shore.

Mangroves are home to thousands of unique plants and animals, with new discoveries being made every year. But the forests are threatened by retail, industrial and housing developments.

Their role was highlighted in the book, *Private Lives: An Expose Of Singapore's Mangroves* (above), which was launched yesterday.

The title is a guide to the plants and animals found in the mangroves,

and calls for their conservation.

Professor Peter Ng, director of the Tropical Marine Science Institute and an editor of the book, said at the unveiling that more of Singapore's mangroves need to be protected.

He noted that mangroves on the northern shores are different from those in the south.

"Rivers make the waters in the north far less salty than waters in the south, which give the plants and animals very different characteristics," he said.

However, Professor Leo Tan, the National University of Singapore's director of special projects, who conceptualised a three-year census of marine species at Pulau Semakau, said it would be premature to pick a site for protection on the mainland.

"Sungei Buloh's 130ha is a substantial amount of land. We have to consider the large pristine sites that are already being protected in firing ranges on our southern islands."

Dr Lena Chan, deputy director of the National Biodiversity Centre at NParks, said there are other ways to protect mangroves besides gazettement for conservation.

"We can also designate them as nature areas, like the mangroves in Pasir Ris Park, Pulau Tekong or the mangrove in Sungei China, which was recently incorporated as a nature area within Admiralty Park," she said.

