

Keeping S'pore clean: 40 years on

Shuli Sudderuddin



PHOTO: NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

THEN: Heaps of rubbish could be seen along the roadside in the 1960s. A lack of waste management infrastructure resulted in streets clogged with garbage.



ST FILE PHOTO

NOW: Proper sanitation and waste disposal infrastructure is in place. Hygiene standards rose after the Government revamped the system.



PHOTO: NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

THEN: Street hawkers in the 1960s often operated in unhygienic conditions. They were resettled in purpose-built buildings in the 1980s.



ST PHOTO: SAMUEL HE

NOW: Food centres dotting the island today, such as the popular Newton Hawker Centre, are clean and hygienic.

Cleaner Nadaison Govindasmy had to clear drains for about 70 homes in Punggol, as part of his work in the 1960s.

Then, households treated drains as rubbish dumps – they were clogged with waste and even animal carcasses.

“People had nowhere to throw their dead animals so there would be bloated bodies of cats and dogs covered with flies. I had to clear them with a spade and rattan basket. It made me nauseous,” said Mr Nadaison, now 56.

Four decades on, he remains in the same job – but dead animals are now unlikely to spoil his day at work.

Mr Nadaison, who covers a 3.5 sq km area in Buangkok Road East, now has his work made easier with mechanised road sweepers.

The story of how Singapore became clean and green is told in an exhibition held by the National Environment Agency (NEA), which opened last Friday at HortPark.

The event marks the 40th anniversary of the first Keep Singapore Clean campaign.

Said Mr Tan Wee Hock, director for NEA's 3P Network Division: “In the 1960s, there was a lack of key infrastructure such as a comprehensive sewage system or good solid-waste management.”

He cited the manual collection of human waste with a bucket in peripheral areas of Singapore.

Things changed for the better when various government agencies took action to revamp the system in 1968.

“We developed our water catchment policy in the 1970s to ensure that water from catchment areas was free of chemicals and pollutants,” said Mr Tan.

The quest to improve sanitation was made even more urgent from the 1970s to 2000, when waste generated rose sixfold due to industrialisation and a growing population.

In the 1980s, the big Singapore River clean-up took place and hawkers by the banks were resettled in purpose-built buildings.

In the 1990s, efforts turned to engaging the community with the introduction of Clean and Green Week.

The exhibition at the HortPark, which ends today, is from 9.30am to 9pm. Admission is free.