

SINGAPORE

A model farmer warrior

The cosmopolitan island state is emerging as the unlikely epicentre of eco-conscious living

By Casey Davison O'Brien

Venture northwest of Singapore's Central Business District and you'll come across a green oasis nestled in an otherwise grey concrete jungle.

The rural district of Kranji is home to a series of independently managed fisheries, dairies, herb gardens and organic vegetable farms. Here lies a hotbed of progressive thought, resistance and, above all, open space.

This precious oasis in an otherwise urban setting stands today as testament to the determination of the founder members of the Kranji Countryside Association (KCA), who refer to themselves as 'farm-preneurs' – innovative farmers who manage agricultural enterprises and promote conservation through eco-tourism and education. They believe passionately that every child in Singapore should be brought up to appreciate their country's natural environment, "to understand where food comes from and to live a life of health and sustainability."

Agriculture has traditionally taken a back seat to the pillar of Singapore's economy, the financial services sector. Yet as business flourishes and the population continues to grow, the country's rapid urbanisation has repeatedly pushed the limits of responsible urban development and sustainable environmental practice.

Singapore's green space and agricultural land has gradually disappeared. In 1967, as much as 130 sq km of the coun-

try was set aside as permanent arable land dedicated to crops and pastures. By 2003, huge swathes of Singapore's farming industry had all but vanished and a mere eight sq km of licensed agricultural land remained.

A chance encounter by a local businesswoman eventually saved the farming area of Kranji from total obscurity.

"It'll be too late when people realise they can't eat money"

Ivy Singh-Lim, co-owner of Bollywood Veggies

While searching for a suitable post-retirement project in 2000, Ivy Singh-Lim visited the Kranji countryside and instantly recognised its potential. Fuelled by her charisma and stubborn determination, she battled her way through the country's web of bureaucratic and logistical obstacles to set up her own four-hectare organic farm and bistro that would ultimately pave the way for the rejuvenation of the entire area.

Bollywood Veggies, of which the 61-year-old is co-founder, is an experiment in organic gardening, environmental sustainability and conservation.

Other farmers in the area have followed suit and opened shops, restaurants, educational centres and B&Bs on their land.

Arguably KCA's most visible and best-known enterprise, Bollywood Veggies, named in recognition of Singh-Lim's Indian-Chinese heritage, has become a model of environmental sustainability and eco-tourism. It grows more than 100 varieties of plants and provides a green, open space for visitors to rejuvenate.

"It'll be too late when people realise they can't eat money," says the self-described gentle farmer warrior.



which to practice a healthy and sustainable way of life.

It has marked the beginning of a formal relationship between Asia-Pacific Lohas (Lifestyle Of Health And Sustainability) and KCA, with the entire area being designated a Lohas region

Kranji has also been chosen as the regional headquarters for Asia-Pacific Lohas, with plans to showcase more regional programmes and activities that promote healthy and sustainable living.

While Kranji serves as an outstanding example of grassroots conservation and sustainability, it also highlights Singapore's dependence on food imports. As a result of the government's lacklustre attitude towards its agricultural sector in recent years, Singapore now produces less than 10% of the food it requires. As global demand for food imports increases and prices rise, Singh-Lim has announced she intends to spend more time reaching out to Singaporeans in 2011 and beyond.

She already gives talks at schools and universities across the city-state discussing the importance of preserving and sustaining what is left of the country's green space, is openly critical of the Singaporean government and advocates for determined progressive reform on issues such as urban planning and the natural environment.

Communities and businesses across Asia are showing signs of significant behavioural change in terms of their recognition of their environmental impact, according to Asia-Pacific Lohas president Adam Horler. Not before time, notes Ivy: "Urbanisation in Singapore is forcing people to live like crowded rats – a country this size will soon crack. Something has to give," she says. ■

The farm invites groups of local students and hosts corporate away-days for tours and presentations on permaculture and organic gardening and to encourage discussion on the long-term sustainability of Singapore.

In 2009, Singh-Lim's labour of love was acknowledged when Asia-Pacific Lohas, a US-led consumer movement promoting health and sustainability across the Asia-Pacific region, named the KCA as the world's best region in



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