Insider or outsider, NEA man wants to engage you

Environmental issues have been in the news recently — from the record spike in dengue cases to the disclosure that a rubbish dump will be turned into a nature area. National Environment Agency chairman Simon Tay talks to Insight about all things green.

BY LI XUEYING

CALL him hyperactive-Mr-Simon-Tay. The writer-post-law lectures-civil society activist-green advocate is a study in contrasts.

He’s considered one of the more prominent Nominated MPs in the scheme’s 15-year history — but thinks there should be a permanent feature on the political landscape.

He objects to the principle of detention without trial — a system which his late father, Mr Tan Siew Huah, who used to be permanent secretary at the Defence and Home Affairs ministries, helped put in place.

As a university lecturer, he’s part of the education system, but does not believe enough is being done to put his son through its paces. His seven-year-old son, Luke, is home-schooled.

The law lecturer at the National University of Singapore, who also chairs the think-tank Singapore Institute of International Affairs, teaches Luke Singapore history, and his wife, Jin Hua, runs a health food store, everything else.

And the last irony, as the 44-year-old himself points out to Insight: “This is the third year I’m chairman of the National Environment Agency — and it’s the least thing that people know about me.”

With his horn-rimmed spectacles and conservative blue shirt and tie, he looks every inch the earnest academic and writer of five books that he is.

Except that since 2002, he has also been overseeing 2,000 people in charge of Singapore’s rubbish, public toilets and hawker centres, among other things.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) was created that year to take over the Ministry of Environment and Water Resources’ daily operations.

As chairman, he helps guide the agency.

It’s like helping to steer the NEA tanker, he says. Day-to-day operations are in the care of the chief executive officer. The overall policy direction is set by the minister.

One contribution Mr Tay thinks he may have made, he says tongue-in-cheek, is in the decision to turn Singapore’s sole working landfill, Pulau Semakau, into a nature haven.

The national graveyard for Singapore’s garbage — unwanted furniture, decayed food and damaged television sets — amounts to 2,000 tonnes a day, a 15-minute ferry ride from the Panjang Ferry Terminal.

Mr Tay went there with some people on a visit three years ago. He suggested it: Why not hold the NEA’s annual family day there?

So on Nov 5, 2003, which is also Tree Planting Day, some 360 saplings ranging from sea grapes to hortenias were planted on the island.

Fast forward to today. Soon, nature lovers will be able to wander through the island’s mangrove mudflats to glimpse great-billed herons, splash through the salt-water lagoons, and marvel at the teeming marine life off its shores.

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Regional role

GIVEN that the environment brooks no national borders, how much of a role should Singapore play on the ASEAN stage?

One issue it should consider is whether it "wants to be a regional power, or simply a global power," Mr. Yaacob says. He brings up an example of how NEA is helping ASEAN cities to cooperate on pollution, which will always be the tension between the need to develop and the need to conserve.

This tension "can be resolved better," he acknowledges.

Also, the city-state's relatively low population, Singapore's density, incorporate more green spaces into the downtown area, which Mr. Yaacob says Mr. Ong Tiong-Usun to take on a larger role as a green area.

Closer to Singaporean hearts — and lungs — is the perennial haze.

Singapore's Pollution Standard Index yesterday stood at 95, just below the unhealthy level, although the air is classified as unhealthy.

The ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary haze incidents was adopted by five ASEAN countries three years ago, but Mr. Yaacob says Singapore has averted a political cost of ratifying it — still absent from the meetings.

"Every single expectation has been signalled to them that everyone wants the haze to come on board," says Mr. Yaacob.

In the end, he says, "it comes back to class discussion, and we have to work pretty hard at it.

Mr. Yaacob has long been an envi-
romental activist.

As an outspoken former NMP for five years (1997 to 2001), he backed integration efforts on environmental issues regarding the environment and civil society.

As Environment Minister, he put up a motion which called on the Gov-
ernment to do more with the four "major" NMPs, and in his decision to demolish the National Library.

He has crossed over from being a civil society activist, heading to a statutory board. But he reckons his gums have been thoroughly bitten by his unique perspective: half in, half out of the establishment. As he was being a former NMP and chairman of a statutory body, who is deeply interested in civil society, I hope I'm playing a bridge role as an insider-outsider. Of course, I don't think it fully trusts me in everything, but I hope I'm not distrusted.

I do hope that I'm genuinely independent."