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Bridging British Malaya and Malaysia.

The Malayan Nature Society and Nature Conservation, 1940-1978

MATHIEU GUÉRIN

Abstract: Peninsular Malaysia hosts a remarkable biodiversity that is under serious threat since the colonial era. Historical sources show that concerned citizens played an important role in maintaining this heritage. Founded in 1940 by British colonists just before the outbreak of World War II, the Malayan Nature Society remained a British dominated organisation during the first decades of its existence. Very few Asians were members. However, these few individuals who, for the most part, came from the upper classes, became very influential after Independence. They supported the actions of the Administration, especially the Game Department, in favour of the protection of the wild fauna and flora of Malaysia and the management of its parks and reserves. The Society was instrumental in creating awareness among the people of Malaysia, especially the most educated ones. It also stood at the centre of a network that connected conservationists, scientists, Game Wardens and decision makers. This network of institutions and individuals allowed Malaysia to pursue a conservation agenda and to develop its own tools and policy to protect endangered species and locations of exceptional value in terms of biodiversity.

Keywords: Malaya, Peninsular Malaysia, wildlife conservation, Malayan Nature Society, elites, post-independence, networks, Taman Negara.

INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), editor of the *Malayan Nature Journal* (MNJ), is today one of the main actors involved in conservation and preservation in Malaysia and a local environmental activist group. MNS is also one of the oldest societies in Malaysia. It was founded by British colonists and was part of a wider movement in the Empire in which “pressure groups became active in promoting legislation, the creation of reserves, and the funding of societies dedicated to the protection of game” (MacKenzie 1988, 201). In Malaysia, as in many other parts of the Commonwealth, wildlife and environment protection finds its origin in the British imperial policy (Kathirithamby-Wells 2005). Today, sixty years after the end of the colonial era, Malaysia is one of the world’s 17 megadiverse countries listed by the United Nations Environmental Programme’s World Conservation Monitoring Centre. This achievement has been made possible only thanks to the continuous involvement of environmental activists who have been able to convince political leaders to take steps in order to preserve Malaysia’s environment and to avoid the annihilation of many threatened species. One of the most iconic accomplishments is the Taman Negara, a National park of more than 4300 km² covered by highland and lowland dense tropical forest and its fauna. It was founded in 1938-1939 as the King George V National Park (Aiken 1994).

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The man who completed the setting up of the park, Chief Game Warden, Edward Oswald Shebbeare, was one of the founders and the first President of MNS in 1940.

This paper will focus on the history of MNS during the colonial era and the two decades after independence. It will describe how the Malaysians took over from the British after Merdeka. It aims at understanding how MNS became an environmental activist organisation, what were its strengths and weaknesses, especially by looking at the networks it established in order to become a capable pressure group.

Sources Available

One of the main sources used here is the *Malayan Nature Journal* itself. An almost complete collection of the journal is kept in the MNS headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. Missing issues have been found in university libraries. All the journals between 1940 and 1979 have been read and studied. From 1948 onwards, the journal published the minutes of the Annual General Meeting, with the names of the office bearers and the matters discussed.

Between 1940 and 1960, the journal regularly printed a list of the society's members. After 1960, we only have a 1972 list of the members of the Selangor Branch (ANM 2002/0016810a). Altogether, 1915 members (340 institutions and 1575 individuals) were listed. The lists provided their name and address. Women's names were always preceded by Miss, Ms or Mrs, which permits us to know the sex of the individual members. In most of the cases, the names allow us to identify the ethnicity of the members, which have been classified as Westerner, Malay, Chinese, Indian, or other Asian. The method is far from being totally reliable. Indians or Chinese bearing European names can hardly be identified if we do not have other information. We have an example with Eric Carl Foenander. He was a planter, Game Warden and big game hunter of Ceylonese descent and should therefore be classified as "Indian". This classification does not aim at assigning an ethnic identity to each individual member, as the matter is much more complex than the name they carry (Barth 1969). However, it allows to take into account the official ethnic classifications used by the British and then Malaysian administrations. Through the address, which in 80% of the cases are the professional ones, and the titles, we can deduce the profession or at least the field of work of the members. For example, there is little doubt that Dr X, receiving the journal at the General Hospital Singapore was a physician, or that Mr Y working at Lima Blas Estate, Perak, and then Johore Labis Estate was a planter. We assumed, unless proven otherwise, that people receiving the journal in hospital were not patients but people working in the medical field, that people receiving the journal in prison were not inmates but members of the administration, or that members receiving the journal in schools were teachers and not students, except when they appeared as junior members. The lists published by MNJ allow a prosopography of the group formed by MNS members in the first two decades of the life of the society. This study will only describe the preliminary findings of such an endeavour that would need much more time and means to be completed.

The Arkib Nasional Malaysia keep some of the personal files of Dato' Henry S. Barlow. Henry Barlow is a chartered accountant, whose family business was in the management of plantations. A graduate from Cambridge University interested in natural history, especially in butterflies and moths, he arrived in Malaysia in 1965. He was a long time treasurer of MNS. His files are particularly important to understand

the functioning of the society in the 1970s. The correspondence of the society with the administration, especially the Game department, the British High Commissioner's office and then the Prime Minister department is also kept in the archives' files. Moreover a few interviews with key witnesses of the transitional period when MNS became a Malaysian society have been conducted in August 2016. Dato' Henry Barlow, Mohamed Khan Bin Momin Khan, former Director General of the Wildlife Department (Jabatan Perhilitan) and President MNS, Dr Lim Boo Liat, a long time member of MNS' Committee and research officer at the Institute for Medical Research Kuala Lumpur, Dr Sivananthan Elagupillay, Jabatan Perhilitan, provided invaluable information that filled the gaps of the written archive material.

The Founding of MNS

In the first decades of the 20th century, the fauna, flora and landscapes of Peninsular Malaysia came under strong pressure with the development of tin mining and commercial plantation, especially rubber. The different sultanates became part of a colonial development frontier, especially on the western edge of the Titiwangsa range. The populations of certain species considered as pests and a threat to agricultural development, such as sambar and other kinds of deer, elephant, crocodile, tiger as well as birds dropped while vast areas of forest were cleared for agricultural or mining purposes and hunting practices were on the rise. Among the dwellers of British Malaya, some concerned individuals started to act in order to stop the depredations, or at least to avoid the annihilation of a large part of the wildlife. The most eminent of these persons was big game hunter and planter Theodore Rathbone Hubback. As a big game hunter, Hubback witnessed first-hand the disappearance of wildlife. He was instrumental in the design of the 1921 "Wild Animals and Birds Protection Enactment". This law reinforced wild fauna protection in the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements and led to the creation of a number of reserves and sanctuaries. It established a body in each of the Federated Malay states in charge of enforcing the law: the Game Department, which later became the Wildlife Department (Perhilitan). In 1930, Hubback chaired a "Wild Life Commission of Malaya" that drafted a comprehensive policy for the protection of wildlife in Peninsular Malaysia (Kathirithamby-Wells 2005). Hubback was appointed as the first Federal Chief Game Warden. Under his leadership, the project for a Malayan National Park was launched and the Game Department became the main public body in charge of conservation and preservation (Gu erin 2017). Ill tempered, Hubback was pushed aside in 1937 and replaced by a Game Warden from Kenya who stayed only one year in office. Then, in 1938, Edward Oswald Shebbeare was appointed as the third Chief Game Warden of Malaya. Shebbeare was a product of the Indian colonial social fabric. A forester in the Indian Forest Service, he was fond of outdoor activities. He took part in expeditions in the Himalayas and was one of the founding members of the Himalaya Alpine Club.

After two years of residence and work in Malaysia, Shebbeare was joined by a handful of European colonists who decided to launch a new association, the Malayan Nature Society. MNS was not the first society of its kind but it was the only one that survived the end of the colonial era (Barlow 2000). The most active members of the group were Shebbeare, A.T. "Sandy" Edgar, a planter and reserve officer in the Army fond of ornithology (Wong 2015, Barlow 1984), and Gladys Le Mare, the wife of the director of fisheries. Shebbeare took the position of President of the society. Edgar became honorary secretary and treasurer and Le Mare editor of *MNJ*. The members of the society were the people who subscribed to the journal. Five issues in

two volumes were published between August 1940 and 1941. The list of the journal subscribers show that MNS was mainly a colonial club. 186 persons had subscribed to the journal, out of which only eight were Asians: one Malay, four Chinese, three Indians including Eric Carl Foenander. The only Malay, Mahmud bin Mat (Fig.1) was then District Officer in Balang Padang, Perak, i.e. a senior civil servant in the colonial administration (ANM 2006/0050177). All the others, 96% of the individual members of the society, were Westerners, most of them British (Fig.2). MNS actually captured the variety of the European colony in Malaya. 58% were working for the colonial administration in various positions and departments: local administration, railways, fisheries, forestry, teachers... 42% were in the private sector, including 27% of the sample who were planters. Among the first subscribers of *MNJ* was Sir Shenton Thomas, Governor of the Straits Settlements and High Commissioner to the Malay States, 1934-1942. Sir Shenton had been in charge of supervising the establishment of King George V National Park (Taman Negara).



Figure 1 : Dato Mahmud bin Mat, First Speaker of the Federal Legislative Council, 1953. Mahmud bin Mat was a founding member of MNS, and became its Vice-President in 1962-1967.

Courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia, ANM 2001/0029261

When MNS was founded, its main aim was to publish the journal in order to allow Malayan residents fond of nature to share their experiences and knowledge.

“Our magazine provides a medium of expression for any member who feels inclined to go through his notebooks, and write up such items as seem worth placing on record. It is our intention that a large proportion of the available space in each issue of the magazine shall be devoted to correspondence, short notes, and queries from our members. This part of the magazine should be very interesting, if our members will help to make it so.”

The articles published in the first issues of *MNJ* show that the journal was mostly designed for amateur naturalists, people with special interest in nature and wildlife. In the pre-war issues, we find stories of walks in the forest, the tales of unexpected encounters of wildlife, descriptions of birds, mammals, snakes, or plants (*MNJ* 1940, 1941). Many civil servants posted in remote location and planters subscribed to the Journal, maybe because of the wish to understand the new and strange world that surrounded them or because of the boredom experienced by many a colonist in their daily life (Dodd 2007). The War and the Japanese invasion in December 1941 put an end to the activities of the society.

The Revival of MNS

In 1945, after the capitulation of Japan, the Allies arrived in Malaya. The British colonial society was then in disarray. Many Europeans had been killed, imprisoned or had fled. The entire colonial administration had been dismantled and the economy was in chaos. Malaya came under military rule, with the setup of the British Military Administration. Priority was then clearly not on wildlife and nature conservation. The Game Department was revived in December 1945 under the authority of the Director of the Forestry Department, T.A. Strong, mainly in order to cope with the proliferation of wild animals that were considered as pests by the planters, especially wild pigs, deer and elephants (ANM 1957/0622753, Kathirithamby-Wells 2005). Shebbeare came back to Malaya in December 1946 to conduct a survey of the parks and reserves. In 1947, he took over from Strong as acting head of the Game Department:

“The Department should be reorganized throughout the Malayan Union (...) Other matters dealt with, besides the all-important one of the protection of food crops, were the formation of an Advisory Committee on fauna and flora, a revised game enactment and restarting the Malayan Nature Society” (ANM 1957/0632830).

One of Shebbeare’s first goals had been to revive MNS because of its action “in interesting the public in wild life” (ANM 1957/0668894). However, Shebbeare being too busy at putting a viable Game Department together, most of the task fell on the shoulders of Sandy Edgar and Gladys Le Mare who both survived the war and stayed in Malaya. They reprinted the pre-war issues of the journal and, as soon as July 1947, they published a first post-war issue.

Sandy Edgar and Gladys Le Mare had to revive MNS almost from scratch. They started by looking for the old members who survived the war and asked them “to make the Society’s revival known to their friends” (*MNJ*, 1947, introduction). The revival of MNS was a success. 284 individual members registered in 1948, only 20% of whom were already members before the War. Meanwhile over 30 institutions, schools, colleges, departments, etc. subscribed to the Journal (Fig.2).

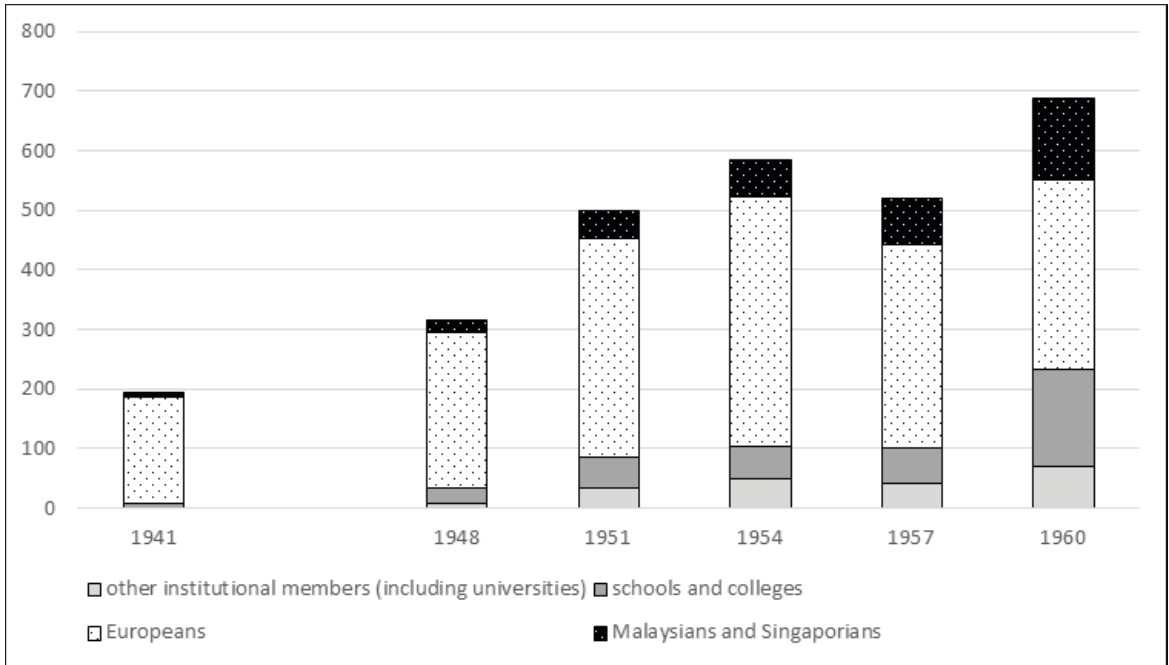


Fig re 2: Evolution of MNS membership 1941-1960

MNS received support from the main research institutions in Malaya: the Rubber Research Institute, the Forest Research Institute, the University of Malaya, the Museum Department and the Institute for Medical Research. These institutions provided MNS with offices, stationary, equipment... Michael Tweedie, the director of the Raffles Museum and a founding member of MNS, actively supported the revival of the society. Between 1947 and Merdeka, the same group of people remained in charge of the society. They were either old members from the pre-war era, such as Edgar, Le Mare, E.J.H. Berwick, an administrator at the Department of Agriculture, R.B. Jago, a botanist in the same department and his wife, Dr Molesworth, a physician with a special interest in ornithology, or people working for the Institute for Medical Research, such as, Dr J. Ralph Audy, Dr J.A. Reid, J.L. Harrison or Ms E.B. Cheek. According to Lim Boo Liat, the Institute had a special role and was instrumental in the reviving of the society. Only a few other individuals, all Europeans, have been involved in the bureau. One of them was the senior British intelligence officer G.C. Madoc, a well versed ornithologist author of *An Introduction to Malayan Birds* (Madoc 1947), who was elected president of the society in 1950 (Tab.1).

In December 1950, MNS drafted its first rules to comply with the requirements of the Registrar of Societies. These rules were adopted during a general meeting held at the Roof Garden of the Hotel Majestic in Kuala Lumpur. Ten years after the publication of the first issue of *MNJ*, and three years after its revival, the society officially came into existence. Its objects were “to promote an interest in Natural History in Malaya, and to publish a Journal which shall be called the *Malayan Nature Journal*.” (*MNJ*, 3-1951).

	President	Treasurer	Secretary	Editor	Vice President	Vice President
1940	E.O. Shebbeare	A.T. Edgar	A.T. Edgar	G. Le Mare		
1941	E.O. Shebbeare	A.T. Edgar	A.T. Edgar	G. Le Mare		
1947	E.O. Shebbeare	A.T. Edgar	A.T. Edgar	G. Le Mare		
1948	A.T. Edgar	E.J.H. Berwick	E.J.H. Berwick	G. Le Mare		
1949	Dr. B.D. Molesworth	E.J.H. Berwick	E.J.H. Berwick	G. Le Mare		
1950	G.C. Madoc	Mrs R.B. Jagoe	Mrs R.B. Jagoe	G. Le Mare		
1951	A.T. Edgar	Mrs R.B. Jagoe	Mrs R.B. Jagoe	J.L. Harrison		
1952	Dr. B.D. Molesworth	H.G. Warren	H.G. Warren	J.L. Harrison		
1953	Dr. B.D. Molesworth	Mrs B.D. Molesworth	Mrs B.D. Molesworth	J.L. Harrison		
1954	Dr. B.D. Molesworth	Mrs B.D. Molesworth	Mrs B.D. Molesworth	J.L. Harrison		
1955	Dr. B.D. Molesworth	Mrs B.D. Molesworth	Mrs B.D. Molesworth	Miss E.B. Cheek		
1956	Dr. J.A. Reid	Mrs N. Reid	Mrs N. Reid	J.L. Harrison		
1957	Dr. J.A. Reid	Mrs N. Reid	Mrs N. Reid	J.L. Harrison		
1958	Dr. J.A. Reid	Mrs N. Reid	Mrs N. Reid	J.A. Audry		
1959	J. Wyatt Smith	Wong Yew Kwan	Tan Keat Chye	G.T.C. Metcalfe		
1960	J. Wyatt Smith	Wong Yew Kwan	Tan Keat Chye	G.T.C. Metcalfe		
1961	J. Wyatt Smith	Wong Yew Kwan	Tan Keat Chye	G.T.C. Metcalfe		
1962	Dr H.E. McClure	Mrs Mildred F. Indorf	Mrs Mildred F. Indorf	Mrs M.E.D. Poore	Dato Loke Wan Tho	Dato Mahmud bin Mat
1963	Dr P.R.Wycherley	Mrs Mildred F. Indorf	Mrs Mildred F. Indorf	Mrs Judy Poore	Dato Loke Wan Tho	Dato Mahmud bin Mat
1964	Dr G.A. Watson	L. Fisher	Mrs A.S. Dyhrberg	J.A. Bullock		Dato Mahmud bin Mat
1965	Wong Yew Kwan	A.K.Jones	Dr Balasingam	J.A. Bullock		Dato Mahmud bin Mat
1966	Dr E. Balasingam	A.K. Jones	Tunku Abdul Aziz	J.A. Bullock		Dato Mahmud bin Mat
1967	Ken W. Scriven	Cyril Gomez	P.J. Verghese	Prof Anne Johnson	Zainal Abidin bin Endot	Dato Mahmud bin Mat
1968	Prof N.S. Haile	Dr D.R. Wells	P.J. Verghese	Lady Medway	Lord Medway	
1969	Dr T.C. Whitmore	Dr D.R. Wells	P.J. Verghese	Dr H.S. Yong	Dr P.N. Avadhani	
1970	Dr P.R. Wycherley	Mrs Whitmore	P.J. Verghese	Dr E. Soepadmo	R.E. Sharma	
1971	Dr. J.A. Bullock	Henry Barlow	P.J. Verghese	Dr E. Soepadmo	Dr P.N. Avadhani	
1972	Mohd Khan bin Momin Khan	Henry Barlow	P.J. Verghese	Dr Yong Hoi Sen	R.E. Sharma	
1973	Mohd Khan bin Momin Khan	Henry Barlow	P.J. Verghese	Dr Cheah Chooi Hwa		
1974	Dr Francis SP Ng	Henry Barlow	Tho Yow Pong	Dr Cheah Chooi Hwa		
1975	Mohd Khan bin Momin Khan	Henry Barlow	Ms Chan Ro Hong	Dr Khoo Khay Huat	Dr P.N. Avadhani	

Table 1: MNS office bearers 1940-1975

The lists of members regularly published by the Journal allow us to know who they were. Between 1947 and 1957, 920 people subscribed to the journal, at least for one year, most of them Westerners. In the introduction of the July 1947 issue, Sandy Edgar made a plea to welcome Asian members:

“I am particularly anxious that we should increase our Asiatic membership, not only because I feel sure that many Asiatics of all races would be interested to receive the journal, but because I hope that many of them might be persuaded to contribute letters or articles, which would be most interesting and valuable to the society as a whole.” (*MNJ*, 1947, introduction)

The Asian membership increased from the pre-war situation, but it represented only a small minority within the Society: 81 Chinese, 22 Indians and only 18 Malays were registered between 1947 and Merdeka, i.e. less than 14% of the members. Despite the early wishes of Edgar, MNS remained a colonial club. The Emergency was a tough period for the society. It became hazardous for Europeans to wander the hills and forests of Malaysian. Those who continued to do it were armed and often integrated in the security apparatus of the colonial power. In 1951, seven MNS members were killed

by insurgents (*MNJ* 1951). Most of the field trips, especially to the National Park, were postponed to better days. It was actually easier for Asians to go to the forest. Lim Boo Liat recalls how he met insurgents while he was trapping animals for the Institute for Medical Research. They did not bother him as long as he did not carry any weapon.

Men, by far, outnumbered women. However, 22% of the members were women and some held executive positions in the society: Gladys Le Mare was the editor of the journal until 1950 and then Ms E.B. Cheek in 1955. Mrs Jagoe held the offices of honorary secretary and treasurer for two years, Mrs Rosemary Molesworth and Mrs Reid for three years, when their husbands were President. Some of the female members of the society were among the most prominent people of British Malaya. Lady Edith Margery Templer, the wife of Sir Gerald Templer, High Commissioner in Malaya 1952-1954, joined the society. So did Tengku Budriah binti Almarhum Tengku Ismail, wife of the raja of Perlis and a descendent of the Patani royal family. The wife of the British civil servant in charge of Chinese Affairs, and future first President of the Municipality of Singapore, subscribed in 1948 with her husband. She was listed as Mrs T.F.P McNeice in *MNJ*, but she was better known by her maiden name, Loke Yuen Peng. She was a daughter of tin tycoon Loke Yew, one of the wealthiest men of Malaysia in the early 20th century. She was an ardent nature conservationist and a philanthropist (NAS Oral History Interview Lady McNeice 1982, 2008).

	1948-1957	1958-1960
Civil servants and public departments officers	31%	18%
Teachers	8%	9%
Research	13%	19%
Military	8%	4%
Medical	6%	4%
Private businesses	14%	13%
Planters	17%	11%
Students	1%	20%
Others	2%	2%

Table 2:MNS Members by fields of occupation

Based on the postal addresses and titles, the field of occupation of 80% of the members is known (Tab.2). 30% of the members, 31% of the Europeans and 80% of the Malays, were working for different departments of the administration. Many employees of the Game Department, the Forestry Department or the Agriculture Department were members. Their line of work brought them frequently in contact with a number of plant and animal species. The Game Wardens were actually encouraged to join the society. Most of the Chief Game Wardens have been members (Guérin 2017). However, other civil servants also joined the society, from clerks to district officers, magistrates to police officers and some high ranking officials. Among the British officials who became members of MNS was Sir Edward Gent, Governor of the Union of Malaya in 1948 who died in a plane accident the same year (fig. 3). Malcolm John MacDonald, former secretary of States for the colonies before the war, former UK Minister of Health in the government of Winston Churchill,

Governor General of Malaya in 1948 and then Commissioner General for southeast Asia was a member between 1948 and 1955. Lim Boo Liat recalls that he was genuinely involved in the activities of the society. Sir Donald MacGillivray, High Commissioner in Malaya from 1954 to 1957, joined MNS as soon as he arrived in Malaysia. He was the British official who negotiated independence with UMNO. Percy McNeice, first President of the municipality of Singapore, was an active member of the society. A few High ranking Malay officials and royals were also members after the war. Sultan Abdul Aziz of Perak became a member in 1948 just before he passed away (fig. 3). The wife of the Raja of Perlis, Tengku Budriah was a member from 1950 to 1955. Abdul Wahab bin Toh Muda Abdul Aziz, Dato' Panglima Bukit Gantang, Menteri Besar Perak was a member from 1951 to 1959. Mahmud bin Mat, a founding member of the society, subscribed again after it was revived. After the war, he became Menteri Besar Pahang in 1948, then Member for Lands, Mines & Communications of the Legislative Council in 1951, Speaker of the Council between 1953 and 1955 (fig. 1). His colleague at the council, the Member for Agriculture & Forestry, Tengku Yaacob ibni Sultan Almarhum Alam Shah, son of the Sultan of Kedah, was also a member of the society. As many colonial clubs the society was eager to attract prominent members of the colonial establishment as well as royals and high ranking Malays, whose education and way of life made them close to the British upper class.



Figure 3 : Lady Gent, Sultan Abdul Aziz of Perak and Sir Edward Gent, Governor of the Union of Malaya, 1948. Both men were MNS members.

Courtesy of the National Archives of Malaysia. ANM 2002/0000580

The second largest group of MNS members were planters. They represented 17% of the society members between 1947 and 1957. All except one were Westerners. With 103 people, the third group was that of people working for private businesses. A quarter of them were in the banking industry, mostly employees of the Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank and of the Chartered Bank. A prominent businessman, Loke Wan Tho became a member of MNS in 1948, when he was rebuilding his personal wealth. A son of Loke Yew and brother of Loke Yuen Peng, he had fled to India during the War (NAS 210, 211). A keen ornithologist, he met there Salim Ali, author of *The Book of Indian Birds* (Ali, 1941) and became his friend and sponsor (fig. 4). After the war, he invested in the cinema industry. He became a committee member and attended most of the meetings. He lent movies to entertain the members who attended the general meetings and represented the society at different international events of ornithology. He regularly provided funds to support the actions of the society.

On the invitation of Loke Wan Tho, Salim Ali also registered and was one of the nearly one hundred members who were working for institutions engaged in research activities, most of them being researchers. Two thirds of them were working in four research institutions: the University of Malaya, the Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur, the Rubber Research Institute, Kuala Lumpur and the Forest Research Institute, Kepong. The Raffles Museum, the Singapore Botanic Gardens, the Dunlop Research Centre, the research stations of the departments of fisheries and agriculture were also represented among others. When MNS was revived in 1948, only 18 researchers subscribed. Between 1954 and 1957, every year, over 60 researchers were members of the society, with a maximum of 68 in 1955. Beyond their numeric importance, scientists had a special place in MNS leadership. Most of the bureau office holders were scientists, and others sat in the committee. The directors of the Raffles Museum, an institution that hosted “one of the finest natural history collections in the British Empire” (Barnard 2014), and of the Botanic Gardens became *ex-officio* members of the committee in 1951. The director of the Raffles Museum, Michael Tweedie, had “an academic interest in crustaceans, fish and reptiles” (Barnard 2014), while the directors of the Botanic Gardens, Murray Rose Henderson until 1954, John William Purseglove from 1954 to 1957, and then Humphrey Burkill after 1957 were trained botanists (Barnard 2016). After 1952, physicians and researchers from the Institute of Medical Research became the main leaders in the management of MNS. Nearly all the positions in the bureau, President, Treasurer, Secretary, Editor, were in their hands. *MNJ* tended then towards a more scientific journal and published many papers on taxonomy. Most of the papers were written by Western scholars with the notable exception of those published by Lim Boo Liat. He had been taught by Orang Asli to identify wildlife and was working at the Institute for Medical Research where he was in charge of collecting small animals. He published a number of articles on the animals that he collected. In 1955, for his 100th birthday, the pioneer botanist in Malaysian natural history and founder of the Singapore Botanic Gardens, Henry Nicholas Ridley, was offered an honorary membership. These scholars provided MNS with a scientific legitimacy. Between, 1947 and 1957, 20 research institutions and universities became members, ranging from local centres and faculties to some of the most respected Western research institutions in the field of natural sciences: the University of Cambridge, Harvard University, the Zoological Society of London and the Chicago Natural History Museum. By sending *MNJ* to universities and research institutions, MNS was able to foster links between researchers working in Malaya and overseas.

Students also became a target for the society. During the first General Meeting of MNS in 1948, Le Mare and Edgar stressed that:

“it was agreed that the society should do what it can to foster the interest of school children in natural history, and to this end it was decided to go ahead with arrangements for: approaching the Education Department with a view to formation of School Nature Societies where these do not already exist; publishing in the Journal simple articles suitable for schools on a variety of nature subjects.” (*MNJ*, 1948)

Very few students became individual members of MNS before Merdeka, but nearly all the elite schools of Malaya subscribed to the journal. The firsts to do so in 1940 and 1941 had been the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, King Edward VII school in Taiping, Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjong Malim, Tuanku Muhammad School in Kuala Pilah and King George V School in Seremban. All of them resumed their subscription after the war, soon joined by many others. 80 schools and colleges, among the most prestigious ones, became members of MNS before Merdeka. Besides, around 60 teachers took individual membership. *MNJ* became a means to disseminate knowledge about Malayan natural history to students. Moreover, Dr Lim Boo Liat recalls how “talks on Natural History to schools throughout the country were carried out by members of MNS in each of the states”.

MNS also drew a few dozen British military personnel, mostly officers, nearly 50 physicians and nurses, a few journalists and priests. Apart from schools, colleges and research institutions, MNS could count on the support of more than 40 other institutional members of a great variety: clubs such as the Selangor Golf Club or the Singapore Swimming Club, libraries, such as the Klang or Perak Libraries, federal departments, such as the Game Department, the Forestry Department or the Department of Agriculture, museums, youth organizations such as the Boys’ Brigade or the Boy Scouts’ Association, private companies, such as Socfin or Malayan Fertilizers.

MNS succeeded in becoming an important institution in Malayan colonial society. It reached the Europeans and the Malayan upper classes, from Malay royalty to Chinese business tycoons, as well as the elite schools. However, despite the genuine interest of many Asians for wildlife and nature (Guérin & al., 2017), MNS was not able to attract many Malaysians, and especially Malays, probably because it was perceived as a colonial institution.

Colonial MNS and Conservation

During the British era, the main goal of MNS was to bring together people fond of nature to share their experience. It was not an activist organisation. This interest for nature led some of its members to urge for conservation action. In the second issue of the journal, a letter was published on the “Natural Beauty spots of Malaya and the need for their preservation” (Reed, 1940). However, such papers were exceptions in the issues of *MNJ* published between 1940 and 1957.

The main action in terms of conservation and preservation of MNS was to educate its readers on the fauna and flora of Malaysia. The British and Malay officials and civil servants, the planters, the forest department officers who were readers of *MNJ* could be informed about the impact of their decisions and actions on the environment, which led many of them to be sympathetic to a conservation agenda. For example, in 1951, a meeting was held to discuss “The future of the Game Department”. Some British officials were inclined to end it for financial reasons. The chairman of the meeting, Tenkku Yaacob, Member for Agriculture & Forestry and a member of MNS, with the support of the husband of Gladys Le Mare, was able to save the Game Department and its conservation mission (ANM 1957/0670611).

In the 1950s, worldwide, the anthropic pressure on the environment increased considerably. New actors for conservation and preservation appeared. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) was started in 1948. The Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire, renamed the Fauna Preservation Society was active all over the world. In this context, there was debate among MNS members on whether MNS should be part of this conservation movement. The bureau of the society was then very reluctant. For the physicians who headed the society in the 1950s, it was not what MNS was meant for. In his 1957 speech, the president of the society, Dr J.A. Reid, stressed how much he thought of MNS chiefly as a leisure society:

“Touching on this subject of our future, in my opinion the Society exists for the pleasure of its members, and so long as there are enough people interested in Natural History, and the Society can survive. The Society does not exist to improve the teaching of biology in schools, or to guard Nature reserves, or for any other purpose of policy. It may incidentally, be able to assist in such matters, but its life is its membership.” (*MNJ* 1957)

Dr Reid did not foresee that a colonial club designed solely for the pleasure of educated expats could not have a prominent place in the upcoming independent Malaysia.

The Challenge of Merdeka and the “Malayanisation” of MNS

After 1955 and the first general elections won by the Barisan Nasional, the prospect of Merdeka and the “malayanisation” of the administration, as was called the process of replacing British expatriates by Malaysians, led a number of British colonists to leave Malaysia. The number of members, including institutional members, declined from 583 in 1954 to 529 in 1957. During the general meeting held in Singapore one month before the declaration of Independence, President Reid acknowledged that “the Society still has far too few Malayan as opposed to expatriate members” (*MNJ* 1957). Meanwhile the rising cost of printing jeopardized its financial balance. MNS had not taken any serious steps to adapt to a changing world. The next year, membership dropped by nearly a fourth.

Subsequently, MNS launched a large promotion campaign to attract students and schools that was quite successful. Dozens of Malayan students joined the society, even if many left after one or two years, and in 1959, 157 schools and colleges had subscribed to the journal (Fig.2). This campaign was largely responsible for a renewed membership of MNS. Between 1958 and 1960, 852 members subscribed to the journal, including 260 institutional members and 592 individual members. 52% were new members and only 42% of the members in 1957 were still members after independence.

This change in the membership allowed a slow malayanisation of MNS. In fact, in the three years that followed Merdeka, two thirds of the individual members were still Westerners (Fig.2). The share of Asians jumped from 13.5% to 33% but they still were a minority. Moreover, a large majority of the Asian members, over 80%, were Chinese. MNS did not succeed in attracting large numbers of Malays and Indians. Between 1958 and 1960, MNS had only 15 Malay members. The share of female members remained stable at 22%. From a European colonial club, MNS was turning itself into a Chinese-Western society. Unfortunately, the lists of members have not been published after 1960. The only available roster for the 1970s is the list of the Selangor Branch members in 1972 (ANM 2002/0016810a). Malaysian members represented then 42% of the 247 individual members. They included 20 Malays, while a little less than two thirds of the Malaysian members were Chinese. The transformation of the Singapore branch’s membership in the post-independence period

seems to have been very similar (Goh, 2014). The situation had improved from the immediate post-Merdeka period, but it appears that it remained difficult for MNS to attract Malay members. In a country where ethnic identities are so dividing, it could have jeopardized the ability of MNS to conduct its actions. However, some among the few Malay members were active and influential and MNS succeeded at never portraying itself according to ethnic lines. That explains probably why the society did not split when Singapore left the Federation in 1965. In 1963, in addition to its English name, the society took a Malay name: *Persatuan Pencita Alam Tanah Melayu*.

In the first years after Merdeka, the positions in the bureau remained in the hands of Westerners (Tab.1). Asians, like Lim Boo Liat, had been accepted in the committee since the early days of the society, but they remained subordinated to Westerners in the decision making process. In 1959, two positions in the bureau were opened to Malaysians: Wong Yew Kwan, a researcher at the Forest Institute Kepong, became treasurer and Tan Keat Chye, a Chinese from Kuala Lumpur, became secretary. In 1962, when the American scientist Elliott McClure was elected President, two new positions of Vice-President were created. Both were filled by prominent Asian members: Mahmud bin Mat and Dato' Loke Wan Tho. Mahmud bin Mat launched a local branch in Pahang. Dato' Loke Wan Tho (fig.4) supported the activities of the society, drawing checks when necessary. His death in a plane accident in Taiwan in 1964 was a serious blow for the society. The first Malaysian President was Wong Yew Kwan in 1965, eight years after independence! The last Western president was Dr J.A. Bullock in 1971. Then in 1972, Mohamed Khan bin Momin Khan, the ketua pelindung mergasetua, was elected President. He retained the position almost throughout the 1970s until Tan Sri Dr. Salleh Mohamed Nor took over in 1978. After 1972, the only Westerner who remained in the bureau was Henry Barlow with a key role as treasurer. Even if Western scholars were still important advisers in the committee, the process of decision making was mostly in the hands of Malaysians 15 years after Merdeka.

The turn towards conservationism

The reluctance of President Reid to see MNS becoming an activist organisation led to tension with the Singapore branch. The branch opposed the government of Singapore when it wanted to convert the mangrove of the Ulu Pandan Nature reserve into a prawn pond in 1958¹. The branch supported the stance of the new director of the Gardens, Burkill, a long time member of the society, who refused to relinquish the land for economic purposes (Barnard, 2016, 229-231). The next year, Reid proposed John Wyatt-Smith to become the new president even if he knew that things would be changing. His last speech as president of MNS appeared as a warning to his successor:

“The success of the Society, in my view, depends firstly on keeping the interest of members, which depends on the Journal; all else is secondary and must not be allowed to jeopardise this. Too much time should not be expended on outside objects such as Zoo, Parks, International Committees etc., if there is any risk thereby of jeopardising the smooth day to day functioning of the Society.”
(*MNJ* 1959, 51)

John Wyatt-Smith was elected at the Annual General Meeting held on July 1959. A forester and a former honorary Game Warden, Wyatt-Smith had been a member of the society since 1941. When elected he was working as a research officer at the Forest Research Institute in Kepong. At the forest department, he was in charge of identifying

¹This contradicts Goh Hong Yi assertion that « the NSS endeavor to save Sungei Buloh in 1988 [was] the first local initiative for nature conservation » in Singapore (Goh, 2014).

areas of forest that should be preserved. “These reserves are chosen, as far as possible, as being representative of the type of natural forest in the area and for their accessibility.” (*MNJ* 1959, 45)

As soon as he was elected, Wyatt-Smith transformed MNS into an activist organisation. According to Lim Boo Liat, he was a true leader and was able to gain the support of many society members. A number of papers published by *MNJ* now focused on conservation problems. In 1961, a special issue on “Nature Conservation in Western Malaysia” was edited by John Wyatt-Smith and Paul Wycherley for the 21st anniversary of the society (Wyatt-Smith, Wycherley, 1961).



Figure 4 : Loke Wan Tho, *Malayan Nature Journal*, Vol XVIII- August 1964, p. 80

The society became involved in conservation programs and public campaigns such as a hatchery program for giant leathery turtles in Terengganu, campaigns to save the Batu Caves and some limestone hills near Ipoh that were threatened by blasting. One of the leading figure of the Batu Cave campaign was M. Nadchatram, a colleague of former President Reid from the Institute of Medical Research, showing the ability of Wyatt-Smith to rally members in favour of his conservation agenda². In 1961, MNS became a member of IUCN. This turn towards conservation prepared MNS for the struggles to come in the 1970s to save Malaysian rhinoceroses, Taman Negara, or the Endau Rompin forests. Not all of them have been successful, but MNS members learned the art of militant action. They linked up with the press, organised photographic exhibitions, essay contests in the schools etc.

They had an important role in raising awareness on conservation issues in Malaysia. “MNS members were periodically invited by the Department of Tourism to give talks on natural history to tour guides in the country.”³ They started to train new generations of amateur naturalists and activists. Some of the students who joined the department of Botany or Zoology at the university of Malaya had been introduced to natural sciences and the natural wonders of Malaysia through MNJ while attending high school or college. We have a few examples of students who joined MNS after independence and played a role in the development of life sciences in post-independence Malaysia or Singapore. Ms Chang Kiaw Lan subscribed to the society in 1957 while a student at the University of Malaya. She was appointed as a botanist at the Singapore Botanic Gardens Singapore two years later. In 1964, she completed her PhD in Cambridge University under the supervision of Prof E.J.H Corner, a founding member of MNS. Chang Kiaw Lan was the editor of the Gardens Bulletin for 17 years. In 1970, she became keeper of the Gardens’ herbarium. She remained involved with MNS, as a committee member of the Singapore branch in the 1970s and Branch Chairman in 1976-1977 (Wong 2003). A Malaysian Chinese student in UK became a member in 1956 and later worked for Kew Gardens. An Indian student at the department of Zoology, University of Malaya, subscribed to the journal in 1959 and took a job working for the Fish Culture Research Station in Batu Berendam, Melaka, upon graduation. A real prosopography of the Asian members of MNS would be necessary to assess the impact of the society in terms of training in life sciences and awareness raising, but it was certainly far from being nil.

Most of the Asian members of MNS in the colonial period were close to the British. After Merdeka, many of the members of the new national elite belonged to the same social group. Tengku Yaacob ibni Sultan Almarhum Alam Shah was the brother of Tengku Abdul Rahman, first Prime Minister of independent Malaysia. After Merdeka, Tengku Yaacob joined the Wisma Putera and was appointed High Commissioner to UK, and then ambassador to the Republic of Ireland, to France, Switzerland and Belgium. He was no longer a member of MNS, but he was still an influential Malaysian official with an interest in environmental issues. Mahmud bin Mat was appointed Chairman of the Public Service Commission by the government of Pahang after Independence (Wycherley 1972). Abdul Wahab bin Toh Muda Abdul Aziz, Menteri Besar Perak, and Tengku Abdul Rahman bin Tengku Zainal Abidin, a District Officer from the Kelantan royal family were among the 15 Malay members of the society between 1958 and 1960. Like Mahmud bin Mat, a number of Malaysian officials had been trained in the Malay College, Kuala Kangsar.

²Dr Lim Boo Liat. Personal comm. July 2017. M. Nadchatram was listed as a member from 1958 but, according to Lim Boo Liat, was involved with MNS since the revival of the society in 1947.

³Dr Lim Boo Liat, personal comm., July 2017.

In 1965, MNS chose itself a Patron: Dato' and then Tan Sri, Haji Dr Abdul Aziz bin Haji Abdul Majid, former Mentri Besar Negri Sembilan and then Selangor. Abdul Aziz was one of the negotiators of the "Merdeka mission" in 1956. After independence, he "was appointed Head of the Civil Service. Permanent Secretary to the Prime Minister's Department and Secretary to the Cabinet" (MNJ 1965), and then Governor of Melaka in 1966. He personally knew all the ministers and most of the high ranking officials. Among the influential members of MNS in the 1970s, we can also mention Tun Ismail bin Mohamed Ali, Governor of the Central Bank. According to the solicitor J.S.H. Skrine a long time MNS committee member, in the late 1960s, Ismail bin Mohamed Ali presented the government of Malaysia with a project of a National Heritage Corporation "that should own all vital lands forming part of Malaysia's natural heritage" for conservation purposes (ANM 2002/0016810b). The Vice-President Dato' Loke Wan Tho (fig. 4) was a man of important personal networks that he used several times to support the projects of MNS. The Permanent Secretary in the Prime Minister's Department, State Secretaries of Perlis, Kedah, Johor and Terengganu, the Chief Conservator of forests, the Chief Game Warden received the journal *ex-officio*. Through these personalities and high ranking officials, MNS had an access to the decision makers at the highest political level. Meanwhile, MNS maintained a close relationship with the Game Department that later became known as *Jabatan Mergasetua* and then *Jabatan Perhilitan* (Guérin 2017). This bond was obvious when Mohamed Khan was heading both the Department and MNS.

Meanwhile, the activities of the society appealed to a number of scholars. The journal was sent to universities and research centres in Malaysia, in Singapore and abroad. Nearly one fifth of its individual members were involved in research activities (Tab.2). Many of them, including scholars of international stature, like the zoologist Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, Lord Medway and then Earl of Cranbrook, author of *Mammals of Borneo and of Wild Mammals of Malaya and offshore islands* (Medway 1969, 1965), the botanist Richard Eric Holttum, author of *Gardening the Lowlands of Malaya* (Holttum 1953) and a number of books and articles on Malaysian flora, or the American physician and ornithologist H. Elliott McClure who published in 1974 *a seminal Migration and Survival of the Birds in Asia* (McClure 1974) signed articles in MNJ. The presence of researchers provided MNS with a scientific legitimacy when it discussed conservation projects with decision makers. Moreover, as a member of IUCN, MNS could link researchers and conservationists in Malaysia and abroad.

In the 1960s, MNS found itself at the centre of a network that connected conservationists, scholars, Game Wardens and decision makers that was efficient to push for conservation policies and actions. For example, in 1959, the Jabatan Mergasetua and MNS lobbied together to get the support of the royal family of Terengganu for their giant leathery turtle hatchery program. MNS successfully supported the affiliation of Malaysia to IUCN. In 1964, using his personal and academic networks, Lord Medway managed to get funds and support to invite David Strickland an American graduate student to study the Sumatran rhinoceroses in Sungei Dusun in exchange for an invitation to Mohamed Khan, then a Game Warden at the Jabatan Mergasetua to be sent to the USA, where he was trained by the Fish & Game Department. After his return, Mohamed Khan was invited in the committee at the request of Lord Medway as "conservation member"⁴. Meanwhile, in 1968, a report written by a Colombo Plan expert, Dr Ward Earl Stevens, proposed a comprehensive conservation policy for Peninsular Malaysia (Stevens, 1968). MNS and Mohamed Khan, who was then acting both as *Ketua Pelindung Mergasetua* and as President of MNS, played an important role in the implementation of this report's recommendations in the 1970s. Through the Prime Minister's Department, they succeeded in bringing it to the attention of a few high ranking officials, including

⁴Letter of Lord Medway, University of Malaya, to Mohamed Khan bin Momin Khan, Game Departement Perak, 31 December 1969. A copy of this letter was provided to me by Mr Lim Tze Tshen.

Tun Abdul Razak, then Deputy Prime Minister. Many of the report's proposals were included in the Third Malaysia Plan (1976-1980). When in the late 1970s, steps were taken to build a dam that would have flooded the lowlands of Taman Negara, MNS and Jabatan Perhilitan fought the project. They mobilised the press, schools, scientists, the public opinion as well as officials. Thanks to all the people involved, Taman Negara was saved and remained one of the most impressive parks in Southeast Asia. The networks of institutions and individuals built by MNS allowed Malaysia to pursue a conservation agenda and to develop its own tools and policy to protect endangered species and locations of exceptional value in terms of biodiversity.

MNS efficiency in the field of conservation: an historical legacy

If MNS was mainly a leisure society for the benefit of the European colonists and the Malayan upper classes before World War II, it gained a real scientific recognition in the 1950s when it started to work closely with research institutions in the field of life science. Its main actions in term of conservation during the colonial era had been limited to provide support to the Game Department and to participate in raising the awareness of the public, especially the elite and their children. Asians were not banned from MNS, but as a colonial club, it was not very appealing to locals at a time when they were negotiating the terms of independence. Those who joined the society were close to the British. Merdeka then proved a real challenge for the society. Because the process of decolonisation was slow and relatively peaceful, because many Europeans stayed after independence, it was possible to link the pre-Merdeka MNS with the post-Merdeka society. MNS has never been an exclusive arrogant British club, but it was for a long time ruled by white men. Asians and women were involved but they were kept in a subordinate position until after Merdeka. It weakened the society when the white men lost their grip on the country. Westerners continued to manage the society after independence and introduced a conservation agenda. Meanwhile, they offered more responsibilities to Asian members. When the Malaysian definitely took over in the 1970s, they were ready.

The links established with the Malayan upper class proved very useful when the society turned its activities toward conservation in 1959. The MNS networks that linked the society to the Jabatan Mergasetua, to researchers both in Malaysia and abroad, to the decision makers and to the general public have proved quite efficient in the 1970s. Through these networks, MNS even had an impact on the drafting of the Malaysian environmental policy.

New players such as the Malaysian chapter of WWF started to operate in Malaysia, but MNS remained a key actor. Contrary to the belief of its President in 1958, the conservation campaigns have indeed been a great help to enhance the society's membership and to attract Malaysians, even if Malays were more difficult to convince than Chinese, or to a lesser extent Indians. In 1992, after the Taman Negara and Endau Rompin campaigns, MNS could claim around 2200 members (ANM 2002/0016810c). Despite some failures, the society succeeded in convincing decision makers of the need to act in order to preserve Malaysia's astonishing natural heritage on several important occasions.

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