

Artist Statement

Singapore Surfacing: Notes from the margins

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How do you take a photograph — or try to make sense of — of something you can't see? As a working photographer trained in the documentary genre, bridging that visual gap of this climate-related phenomena to a general audience proved to be more challenging than I thought.

There is an oversupply of textual information in publications, scientific research and also social media, but some argue that using photography by individuals facing the climate crisis best depicts the extent of devastation endured by communities, wildlife, and the environment.¹ Visual storytelling can shift public perception and behaviours, which in turn influences national and international responses to the crisis.²

Trying to start somewhere

Before working on *Singapore Surfacing*, I was the least bit interested in the topic of rising sea levels for two reasons. One, the challenges faced seem so far away for one person living in a small country when we are faced with more pressing and more immediate matters now.

Two, the science seemed too intimidating and, to me, the information was being preached by and to the same choir.

I had a taste of this when I reached out to a local climate advocate group — in our first conversation — who seemingly chided me as I was looking for people who may not believe in this phenomena. They said:

“In the next five years, rapid change needs to happen to stop the worst effects of climate change, and there is frankly no room for climate deniers to continue denying that the climate crisis is real.” I understand and respect their views but I felt small in my climate change journey. Surely there was enough room to engage with everyone? Perhaps my question is not valid or my own ignorance deserved to be highlighted.

I reached out to another well-known veteran environmentalist and this person turned down my project's approach which is perfectly understandable. The person said:

“I'm NOT among those who enjoy or spend time catastrophising rising seas. I will not contribute to any effort that does so. In fact, I am trying to do the opposite. Trying to help Singapore re-imagine a new kind of shore in the face of rising seas and climate change. This is a lot harder but will give hope for the future. And motivation for people, especially young people, to tackle challenges in positive ways.”

This person made a fair statement but it opened to my eyes to the different approaches and perspectives of rising sea levels from established figures.

Voices from peers, experts

But I was not alone, many of my peers and people I spoke to felt the same way about feeling distant or uninterested about such a topic. For new homeowner Yeo Wei Lun — his public housing flat just beside the Singapore coast — he first learnt of rising seas in secondary school as knowledge necessary to 'pass' his geography class. He said:

“Environmental sustainability issues in our local context doesn't seem like something that's a high priority in our education system, and also in our social or cultural norms.” He added: “Perhaps because we're in a region that does not experience natural disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, we've taken it for granted like ‘it could never happen to us’.”

Meanwhile, Firdaus Sani, founder of Orang Laut SG and an Orang Pulau/Laut descendant, wants to include lived experiences as an important part of the rising seas conversation instead of just focusing on projections and data. He said:

“It's about communities who may not have the language or tools to articulate what's happening in climate terms, but who are already feeling its effects. If we don't listen to them, we risk missing the most urgent signs. Understanding sea level rise through the eyes of coastal communities brings in not just urgency, but also responsibility, especially for those who may have more power to act.”

For university educator Lim Cheng Puay, he argues that sea level rise is a complex phenomena caused by many factors such as the melting of glaciers and ice caps and also the thermal expansion of water. He said:

1. Capturing Climate Change: How Photography Can Tell the Story of a Warming World. Read: <https://earth.org/capturing-climate-change-how-photography-can-tell-the-story-of-a-warming-world/>

2. Capturing the Anthropocene: Changing Depictions of the Climate Crisis. Read: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/environment/capturing-anthropocene-changing-depictions-climate-crisis/>

“The worrying thing for me is that once this process has started it will take a long time to slow down or even stop the process. So, what we are witnessing now is likely to become more severe in the future. This is a cause of concern for me. Though we should still keep trying to reduce our carbon emissions we also need to think about how we adapt to a future with higher sea levels.”

Only during the course of working on this project, I realised that the need for urgent action and also to advocate the importance of sea level rising should start as soon as possible. But the question is, how?

Core principles for Climate Change communication

In my research, I came across non-profit Climate Visuals — backed by international research and expert insights — and they argue that there needs to be more compelling and diverse visual language around climate change³ instead of polar bears and melting ice caps.

Though not all of the principles are useful for this project, I am listing it down here so that it can be a learning point for those attending the Exactly Dinner and Peer Dialog. An important point is that ‘classic’ images may breed cynicism and fatigue:

1. **Show real people, not staged photo-ops:** Authentic images of individuals expressing identifiable emotions are more powerful than staged photographs, which can be perceived as gimmicky or manipulative. Research indicates that people prefer ‘authentic’ images over staged photographs, which they saw as gimmicky or even manipulative.
2. **Tell new stories:** Less familiar images can help tell a new story about climate change, reshaping the public's visual representation of the issue. Familiar, ‘classic’ images may be especially useful for audiences with limited knowledge or interest in climate change, but they also prompted cynicism and fatigue in discussion groups.
3. **Show climate causes at scale:** When communicating the links between high-carbon behaviours and climate change, it's best to depict these behaviours at scale to avoid defensive reactions. Individual causes of climate change, such as meat-eating, may not be recognised as such, and if they are, may provoke defensive reactions.
4. **Climate impacts are emotionally powerful:** Images of climate impacts can prompt a desire to respond or get involved but can also be overwhelming. Coupling images of climate impacts with a positive or solution-oriented narrative can help people take action.
5. **Understand your audience:** Levels of concern about climate change determine how people react to images. Images depicting solutions to climate change generated positive emotions across the political spectrum, whereas images of distant climate impacts did not test as well with people with centre-right values.
6. **Show local (but serious) climate impacts:** Images of climate impacts in places people are familiar with are likely to be most powerful. However, there is a balance between localising climate change and trivialising the issue if the impact is seen as not serious.

Approach to Singapore Surfacing

Initially, I thought that using personal portraiture as a vehicle to drive the narrative of sea level change would translate to a better visual experience for the viewer. My inspiration came from Chinese photographer Li ZhenSheng who is best known for his documentary work on the Cultural Revolution.⁴ But I realised that I was not ready — though there are some frames I kept which I feel may be able to tell this story better. Instead, I decided to meet, have a conversation and photograph people who had a closer relationship with the sea.⁵

It didn't help that visually, it proved more challenging as we can't operationalise this abstract concept of sea level rising. For example, in Indonesia, a housewife and her family plants 15,000 mangroves annually to fight the advancing sea on their vegetable plots and rice fields near their 35-year-old home.⁶ We do not have that in Singapore or the change is happening in invisible ways that may not be made visible through photography, yet.

Interestingly, it was only after heading out in a boat, experiencing that feeling of leaving the certainty land and then surrounded by the uncertainty sea, did I achieve more clarity in this project. You can only understand the impact and power of rising seas if your paradigm is sea-first instead of land-first. And that is what I hope everyone present during the Exactly gatherings and any other gathering will understand.

³ To learn more on Visuals & media – key insights, you can refer to here: <https://climateoutreach.org/visuals-media-key-insights/>

⁴ *Between Me and Mao: Li ZhenSheng's Photography of the Self, 1958-1982*. Read: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/grants/the-robert-h-n-ho-family-foundation-greater-china-research-grant-papers/between-me-and-mao-li-zhenshengs-photography-of-the-self-1958-1982>

⁵ *Island Nation*. Read: <https://www.zakariazainalphoto.com/island-nation>

⁶ Family in Indonesia turns to mangrove trees to tackle climate change. Read: <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2025/4/24/indonesian-woman-turns-to-mangroves-to-fend-off-rising-tides>