



Ong Chong Ren

Pursuing a Bachelor of Science (Plant Science) programme at the Australian National University

The Royal Botanical Gardens of Sydney with the Opera House in the background

As a child, the natural world has always been a source of amazement and curiosity for me. While other kids fiddled with the controls of their gaming consoles or sunk their teeth into the latest computer game on the market, I was usually found in the garden watching a new butterfly emerging from its pupa, or simply watching with anticipation as the next crop of long beans began to ripen. Growing up in a country where towering skyscrapers and ever-widening expressways ruled the landscape, I had always wanted to experience the great outdoors myself.

Volunteering at the Singapore Garden Festival in 2006 and again in 2008 was inspiring, as I watched the cold, grey walls of Suntec City's convention halls become transformed into a lush paradise of colour and life. The desire to do the same with Singapore's concrete landscape was a major motivation for me, and the NParks scholarship became an obvious choice as I explored the options I could take to pursue my passion in the natural world.

Being a member of Green Culture Singapore and working with like-minded people in giving talks and tending stalls at various functions such as GardenTech and the SGF have also allowed me to understand the perceptions of the general public and the challenges they face with gardening in a high-rise environment.

Not long after being awarded the NParks scholarship, I soon found myself on a flight to the bush capital of Australia, where I commenced my studies at the Australian National University. My first year at university has been nothing short of amazing, as I sat through lectures conducted by the brightest and most passionate professors in the fields of natural science.

The field trips were the highlights of each course, as these are times when I get to see the sheer majesty of nature with my own eyes, not through pictures in a book or documentaries on a television screen. Within the span of a few months, my courses have taken me from the highest points of the Snowy Mountains to the most pristine beaches along the southeastern coast of New South Wales, from stark arid plains to lush coastal forests.

Studying overseas on the NParks scholarship has given me an opportunity to experience the natural world in a way that could never have been possible back home, and my advice to anybody with a love for the environment would be to keep an open mind and take the opportunity to explore, even if it means venturing far out of one's comfort zone. It is an experience never to be forgotten.