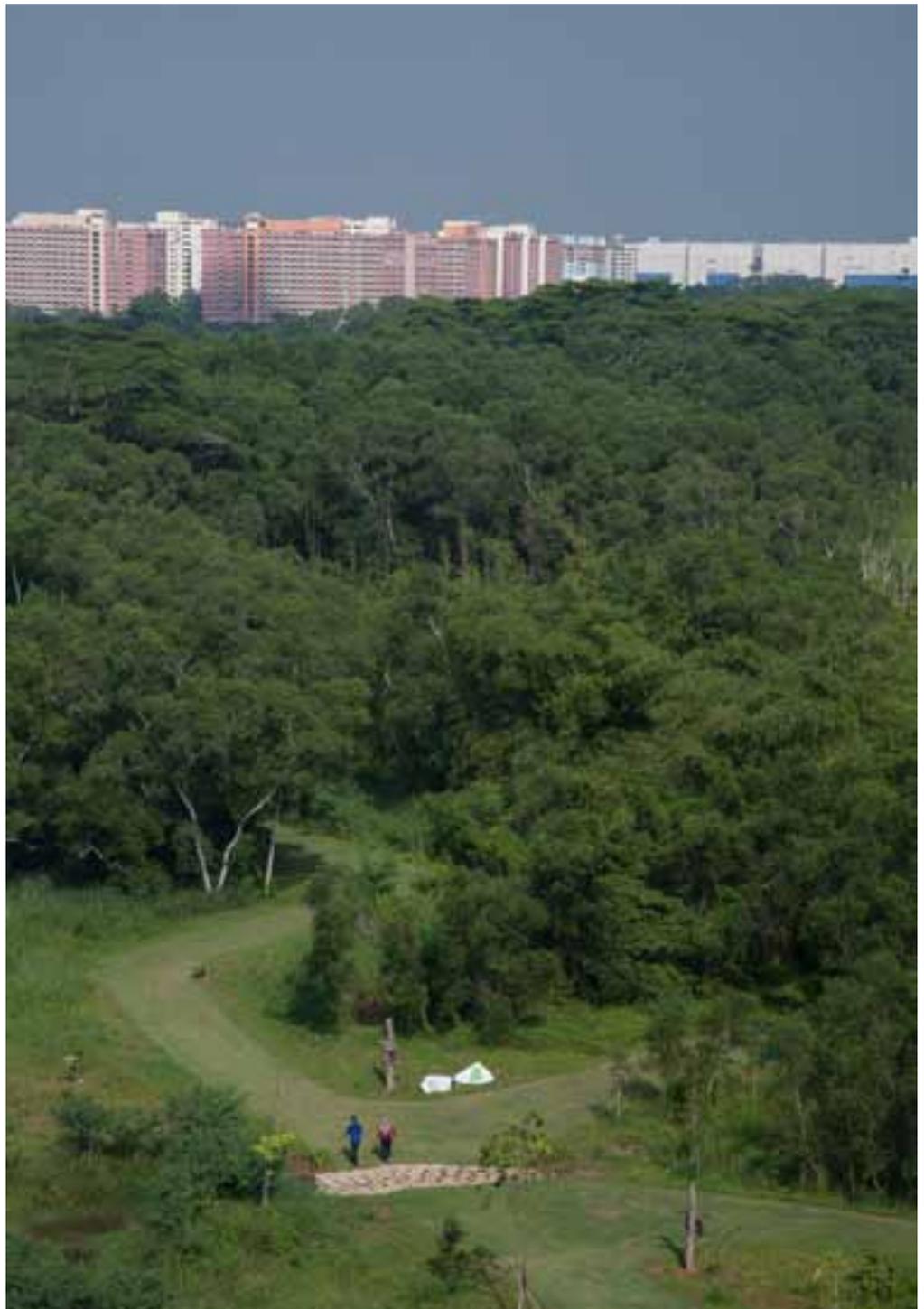


A Walk through the Years in Singapore's Parks

Interview with Kong Yit San

Text by Ho Rui An
Photography by Jeremy San



RIGHT & OPPOSITE
Tampines Eco Green.



Mr Kong Yit San has been with the National Park Boards (NParks) for more than 30 years, beginning from the days when Singapore was still an aspiring “Garden City.” He was previously the Director of the Parks Division before assuming his current position as Assistant Chief Executive Officer, Park Management & Lifestyle Cluster, in 2010. In this interview, we hear from him as he speaks candidly on the transformation of our parks over the years and the ways they have enriched our recreational and civic lives.

CG: How has NParks evolved over the years, from the time when the vision for a Garden City was first unfurled to now?

KYS: I joined the Parks and Recreation Department – the predecessor of NParks—in 1980. That was the time when there was a lot of talk about the vision of a “Garden City,” which imagined Singapore as a place with lots of greenery, tree-lined roads and public parks. This idea arose because that was the period of rapid development and we wanted to overturn the image of a developing country as one where there is a lot of chaos. We wanted to show that we could do it differently, such that good systems, good infrastructure and beautiful gardens can exist alongside development.

Most of the stakeholders in those days were only thinking about the most efficient means of creating a well-maintained garden. I remember

when I first joined the department; there was a lot of grass to be cut, trees to be planted. Parks were just seen as open spaces with minimal landscaping. But as we moved into the nineties, we became more sophisticated, introducing more colour and variety to our parks and building facilities within them. We collaborated with other agencies, trying to get them involved in the making of the Garden City.

Then in the 2000s, we started to wonder: is it enough to just have a park that looked nice? So from then on, we started to shift our attention to making people appreciate and use these spaces and ultimately give them a sense of ownership over the parks. How can we capture the mind-share of the people? We are now looking into creating the “City in a Garden,” in which whenever you step out of your home or your office, you will know that you are living in a garden itself.

CG: What were some of the challenges you experienced in the early days?

KYS: In the 80s, we were so concerned about efficiency than design. What was important then was how well and how fast you can grow the plant and how cheap it was to grow and maintain. For streetscape planting, we had used fast-growing, easy-to-grow trees that required the least maintenance. But today, we know that we cannot just grow trees in such a regimental way and hope that they will all grow at the same pace and assume the same form. Nature doesn’t work that way. Back then, we had a lack of experience and knowledge in the materials we were using. We were introducing trees from forest environment, such as those in Malaysia, but we didn’t know too well how a tree introduced from a forest would grow in an urban environment. As a result, we experienced some problems like cracked pavements, uplifted drains and damages done to our infrastructure caused by these trees with highly aggressive root systems.

At that time, being a young Garden City, we wanted to try out different kinds of plant species. But along with the plants came other things – bees, for instance. I remember that when we introduced the Australian Bottlebrush into some of our parks, the honeybees came during the flowering season. There were people who started to scream and asked us to get rid of the bees, which was not possible, because bees are attracted to the numerous flowers for their nectar.

CG: In what ways are the challenges different now?

KYS: The challenges then and now are rather similar. Now, we emphasise on challenging ourselves to use materials in innovative ways. But the expectations today are much higher. Then, the job was considerably easier. It was about creating this picture-perfect park with immaculate lawns and nicely pruned trees with no litter in the parks. Along the way, we realised that we are building parks for people to enjoy and appreciate. So today, instead of just making a picturesque park, we also want the space to add value to the users.

CG: How do you think our parks can shape the lifestyles of everyday Singaporeans?

KYS: Surveys do tell us that although not every Singaporean has the habit of visiting our parks, they are appreciative of their presence.¹ They are positive about it because it adds variety to their environment. Today, we try to attract people to our parks by offering a variety of recreational options. Take cycling for instance: in the past, all the bikes for rental were of the same standardised type, but today we have a whole range of bikes available for you to choose from. In some parks, we also have wellness spas, fitness areas and also dog runs for pet lovers. These are things we never had in the past.

CG: How do you go about providing a park that is able to serve the needs of users across different demographics (eg., families, elderly, children, etc.)?

KYS: The good thing is that we have quite a number of large and small parks – some 350 or more, if I were to include each and every one. This kind of spread gives us the opportunity to meet different needs. We organise our parks into categories based on the different lifestyle experiences they offer. East Coast Park, for instance, has a lot of recreational opportunities along its long, linear stretch. Kids have their corner to learn cycling, sport lovers have a space to fly sport kites and the adventurous ones have their extreme skate parks.

But we try to avoid making what some people call a “Senior Citizen Park.” We can have a corner with some senior citizen fitness equipment, but we clearly see the need for the elderly to see and interact with the young, the next generation.

We also have HortPark, which is a gardening hub. Although gardening enthusiasts tend to come from the older generation, we are finding ways to attract children by putting in games and other activities into gardening. You would be surprised by how responsive children can be when it comes to gardening.

But at the end of the day, things are very dynamic in Singapore. The demographic composition of a place may change over time. In some estates, the kids may grow up and move away.



This is the reality of things in Singapore. Things change.

CG: Over the years, there appears to be an evolution towards the creation of thematic parks such as the Sengkang Riverside Park and HortPark. How did this come about? What are the special considerations and processes that come into play for such parks?

KYS: “Thematic parks” is a term we try to avoid. When we say “theme parks,” people tend to imagine places like Universal Studios and Haw Par Villa. We don’t have a theme in a strict sense, but we have a dedicated purpose. HortPark was formerly a nursery where we grew our own plants, so we decided to ride upon this existing identity and develop it into a place for promoting gardening – for enthusiasts and industry partners to share knowledge, rub shoulders and network.

Sengkang Riverside Park was originally intended as a fruit park. But when the adjacent river was dammed up to function as a reservoir, we realised that we were very constrained in terms of how we can help the fruit trees grow. Fruit trees need a very different maintenance regime. They need to be cared for in a way different from ornamentals; otherwise, they would bear no fruits. We tried to adapt the park to the conditions of the landscape by making it a park for water activities.

We always tend to develop our parks in anticipation of the needs and demands of the public. For instance, at East Coast Park, we play up the sports and wellness aspect in anticipation of the sports hub, which is opening literally at its doorstep.

We also try to play up what already exists in the environment. Tampines Eco Green, which is now opened to the public, for instance taps into the



OPPOSITE & ABOVE, ALL Youth Olympic Park.

Take cycling for instance: in the past, all the bikes for rental were of the same standardised type, but today we have a whole range of bikes available for you to choose from. In some parks, we also have wellness spas, fitness areas and also dog runs for pet lovers.

BELOW, ALL Tampines Eco Green.



natural look and feel of the area. And we have in some ways improved the biodiversity in this park.

CG: Given the scarcity of land in Singapore, how does NParks ensure that the pockets of green spaces in the country are well-used and appreciated?

KYS: Scarcity is a condition that was there from day one. What we do is that for every spare space we have, we try to green it up. Over the years, different agencies have also come to us, offering feedback. HDB, for instance, would convey the residents' feedback to us, asking us to add a few more trees or benches. Same goes for PUB and its waterways. So scarcity itself is not really a problem. It's more about how well different agencies work and collaborate with each other as partners

At the end of the day, we want these places to be appreciated, not just well-used. A piece of land in a crowded district could be very well-used. But I cannot build up a garden over there because people will step on it and it will be all gone. We want to move away from pure greenery towards space optimisation for recreation, balanced with provision of greenery. For instance, with a utility building, can we screen it up with plants to soften its look and bring down the ambient temperatures? Can we convert one side of a substation building into a rock-climbing wall?

CG: I imagine that in the designing of any green space, there is a need to keep a balance between configuring the space for civic and recreational purposes and conserving its natural beauty. How do you ensure such a balance is maintained?

KYS: For every park, we want to create both recreational and civic spaces and at the same time, conserve its natural beauty as much as possible. Maintaining this balance is always a challenge. East Coast Park used to have long grass areas, or what some may term as bird sanctuaries. But with more and more visitors coming, we had to selectively open up these spaces. But still, we have kept the big trees and ensured there are some nooks and corners of forested areas. We cannot say that just because a space has been forested all along, we cannot do anything with it. When we chose the location

for the extreme skate park, for instance, we chose it because it's near the food centre and underpass. There were some trees in the area, which had to be removed, but as much as we could, these were later replanted in other areas after the development. We always try to make sure the tree quantum is not compromised but in fact increased.

CG: Do you think Singaporeans are proud of our Garden City, or is there a tendency to take it for granted?

KYS: I think we are definitely proud of our Garden City. We open our eyes and everywhere we see is greenery and naturally, we take it for granted that it will always be there. But Mother Nature will always throw us challenges. Weather patterns may change. Temperatures may change. What we have now are things we worked hard to achieve. I am sure Singaporeans are proud to be living in a garden.

CG: How do the parks management programmes in Singapore differ from those in other countries? Is there a particular country which you look up to in this regard?

KYS: Frankly, it is quite hard to benchmark ourselves against other countries. Due to the difference in our cultural practices, it's often not possible to adopt their practices wholesale. For instance, in New Zealand, because of their heritage, they can have a Maori cultural programme. We cannot do this in Singapore because we are so culturally diverse. We cannot have a programme that is solely based on Chinese culture, for instance. So we try to be sensitive to cultural differences when programming in our parks.

Even for things like guided audio tours that you may readily find in Japan, it may be popular there but people here may not like it due to our humid weather. They may feel that the ear pieces are so drenched in perspiration of others. So because of the difference in humidity and cultural practices, such things may not work in Singapore.

But nevertheless, we do take some practices from places like Australia, which has a very good tree care programme and New Zealand, which tries to use local resources as much as possible.

CG: Can you tell us more about World Parks Day which is happening later in the year?

KYS: The concept for World Parks Day² was introduced to me two years ago by my friends in Parks Victoria. They dropped me a note, asking if we were interested in taking part. It is a very simple event: just take a photograph of yourself enjoying the park and upload it for the world audience. Very much like Earth Hour; it is just a simple, intimate celebration. This year, we are trying to do a bit more than that by having a few programmes, such as carnivals, and are working with various sponsors as well as community groups, such as Taichi groups and brisk walkers, to come enjoy some activities during the week. Ultimately the event is about your personal enjoyment of the park. And telling your friends about it.

CG: On a more personal note, what is the most enjoyable or rewarding aspect of your job?

KYS: Every time when I'm overseas and if people ask me where I work, I would tell them, "You know 'Garden City of Singapore'? I'm the gardener." After managing the parks for so long, there is a sense of satisfaction when you see how they grow. Watching the wildlife come in, the people enjoying your parks and smelling your flowers...all these bring a smile to my face. Take Tampines Eco Green for instance; when we did a census before we started developing it, there were only 30 species of birds in the area, but in January this year, we found that the number has grown to 60. Things like these give me a sense of accomplishment and pride in my work.

But of course, every job has its work hazards. Every time I visit a park, I would be busy checking everything—check the dustbins, check for safety hazards, check the trees. Only after I've done my round of checks, then can I finally relax and enjoy the space. **CG**

¹ According to the findings of the latest Parks Usage and Satisfaction survey by NParks for year 2009, 88% of respondents agreed that "parks are necessary spaces even though they do not make use of them."

² The Parks Festival will be held from 17 to 25 Sep 2011. More details will be posted at the website of the National Parks Board.







The Tampines Eco Green taps into the natural look and feel of the area. In some ways the biodiversity in the park has been improved.

