

MEDIA FACTSHEET

NParks' Pioneer Volunteers

SBWR's growth over the years was made possible through the contributions of many volunteers, including a group of approximately 50 pioneer volunteers who helped shape Sungei Buloh's growth over the years, beginning from the 1990s.

Three of our pioneer volunteers —Mdm Kwan Sau Kuen, Mr Wong Kum Sang, and Mr Allan Teo, — share about their volunteering experiences (back then and in more recent years), their memories of Sungei Buloh, and their relationship with nature, below.

Mdm Kwan Sau Kuen (SK), 60, Nature Guide

Sau Kuen, or SK as she prefers to be called, has an infectious enthusiasm for her favourite nature reserve. "Besides migratory birds, we used to be able to see many butterflies there," she reminisces. "Sungei Buloh is one of the few places in Singapore which is kept rustic and natural. The wonders of the mangroves are not something you'd normally associate with our urban city, and it's important to conserve them for the next generation to enjoy."

The chatty 60-year-old has been leading guided walks for more than 15 years at Sungei Buloh and later, at the Istana. Her most memorable experience at Sungei Buloh was when she led a group of senior citizens around the reserve, and they ended up teaching her a thing or two. "They were able to point out the different species of fish to me and tell me which were edible!" she laughs. "It was lovely to be able to learn from visitors and grow as a guide."

A keen bird photographer in the past, SK recalls the turning point in her life when she was motivated to share her knowledge with others. "In the 90s, visitors often left Sungei Buloh disappointed, remarking that they could not spot any birds. What they didn't know was that the patches of brown they thought were part of the soil were actually birds! It was then that I knew I had to do my part, to raise awareness among Singaporeans of the many flora and fauna species we have here."

For those who're keen to learn more about nature, SK's advice is to start out like how she did, many years back. "The best way to gain the knowledge is to be trained as a guide. For those who're shy, it also helps increase self-confidence and develops communication skills." Sounds like a win-win to us.

Wong Kum Sang, 67, Nature Guide

Kum Sang's volunteering journey with NParks began in 1996. Having grown up in a kampong and being in close contact with nature from a young age, he was familiar with the great outdoors and wanted to share his experience with others.

Besides leading guided walks at Sungei Buloh, Pulau Ubin and Central Catchment Nature Reserve, Kum Sang also assists in other conservation activities which include animal surveys, reforestation and mangrove salvaging. The seasoned guide also passes on his expertise by training younger volunteers. Not one to rest on his laurels, he continues to volunteer a few times a month and in his spare time, upgrades his skills and knowledge by visiting our green spaces and reading up on conservation issues at the library.

His most memorable experiences volunteering at Sungei Buloh include spotting a large number of water snakes in the mudflats and observing the return of native species such as the Smooth-coated Otter.

“When I started volunteering in the 1990s, we were very much left to our own devices when it came to learning. We had to read up on our own and learn about the different habitats and species as we went along. Now NParks has a more structured programme in place where experienced volunteers can mentor younger ones,” he shares.

Any tips for those just starting out on their volunteering journey? “Be keen to learn, never stop upgrading yourself and most importantly, nurture your interest in the outdoors by being around like-minded, passionate people.” We couldn't have said it better ourselves.

Allan Teo Woon Chye, 67, Nature Guide

The first chairman of the NParks volunteer group, Allan's passion for nature is evident when he shares about his experiences at Sungei Buloh. “It all started 20 years ago, when I brought my sons there so they could observe birds in the wild for a school project. We met a lady from NParks, then called the Parks and Recreation Department, who asked if we wanted to volunteer with them. I started by helping out with bird ringing at Sungei Buloh as well as leading guided tours there, later branching out to leading walks at Bukit Timah, Pasir Ris, Labrador and the Southern Ridges.”

At his peak, Allan volunteered almost every other weekend, leading tours for people of all ages – from kindergarten students, employees of corporate organisations to elderly residents. Those who had him as a guide were impressed by his knowledge and dedication. Ngee Ann Secondary invited him to be one of the instructors of their horticultural club, which he did so for four years. He also remembers his peers fondly – “The NParks staff I met in my early volunteering years made a great impact on my guiding” – as well as those who've expressed appreciation for his skills. “A Raffles

Institution student said I was one of the best guides he had ever encountered. Knowing that I'm doing my part to inspire the current generation keeps me going," he smiles.

An avid gardener, Allan looks after his plants with tender loving care. "I have all kinds of plants at home – flowers like orchids and hibiscus, fruit trees like jackfruit, chiku, banana and water apple, and even vegetables like chai sim and spinach." His green thumb was cultivated from when he was just a boy. "Having grown up in a kampong, gardening was part and parcel of my childhood, and is one of the ways I indulge in my love for the outdoors."