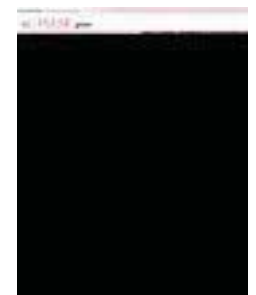


Headline	Heart of a city		
MediaTitle	New Straits Times		
Date	09 Mar 2019	Color	Full Color
Section	Life & Times	Circulation	36,278
Page No	42,43	Readership	108,834
Language	English	ArticleSize	1746 cm ²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 60,186
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 180,558



RIP Van Winkle falling asleep under a tree and waking up a hundred years later is emblematic of how time stretches in the forest. These are places to dream. In the forest, you're no longer chasing after time; you're deep inside time. This is a vital antidote to our crazy city culture, spinning dizzily from one thing to the next.

Take a walk into the forest, and the longevity of the trees and the purposeful rhythm of the forest will offer something different. The calm of the forest isn't passive. Here is continuity, energy, beauty, stillness — and enviable efficiency. The woods waste nothing. The forest is a natural economy that supports its life and ours. It isn't a luxury. If we want to re-stabilise our climate and planet, the re-wilding we'll need begins with protecting what we already have.

For the Taman Tugu project team, it's the collective effort to rehabilitate and protect a 26.7ha land that promises to deliver from the get go. The secondary forest that thrived on once was home to Malaysian government officials including Malaysia's first Lord President, the nation's first director of agriculture as well as Finance Minister Tun Tan Siew Sin. Its shaded groves were also home to British residents (back in our colonial years), government quarters; and remains of these buildings are still evident — covered with vines and undergrowth — as you walk through the undulating trails within the park.

"It's a different world out there," says Calvin Jacob, Taman Tugu project director. Even under the midday sun, they're places of murk and mystery, blotting out the light with a *mille-feuille* of foliage. It's also, on a crisp February morning, eerily beautiful; its twisted trees casting strange shadows on the paths as we walk, talking and laughing — our voices piercing through the muted silence under the dappled green canopy.

"Look out there," he points at the distinctive Petronas Twin Towers that looms up from beyond the periphery of the park. "As the crow flies, we're only about two kilometres away from the Twin Towers. It's remarkable how this place is right in the middle of the city, and yet it's far removed from the sounds of the city."

He's right. Birdsong, crickets and the buzz of insects dominate the sounds within this space. Still under the radar by most parkgoers, the park is made up of tall trees, plants, streams and undulating

trails that would be more at home in a rural outpost than in the middle of a metropolis.

PROTECTING MALAYSIA'S PUBLIC SPACES

For Jacob and his team, it has been an eventful journey to see the park finally settling in its current shape and form. The vast lush secondary forest that developed over the once-habitable land lay dormant for many years. "This land was initially brought to Khazanah Nasional Bhd attention as a proposal to be converted into a for-profit tourist attraction theme-park," he recalls, adding bluntly: "Initially, we thought it was a great idea. The numbers made sense and the multiplier to the economy was also good. So we took it on as a commercial project."

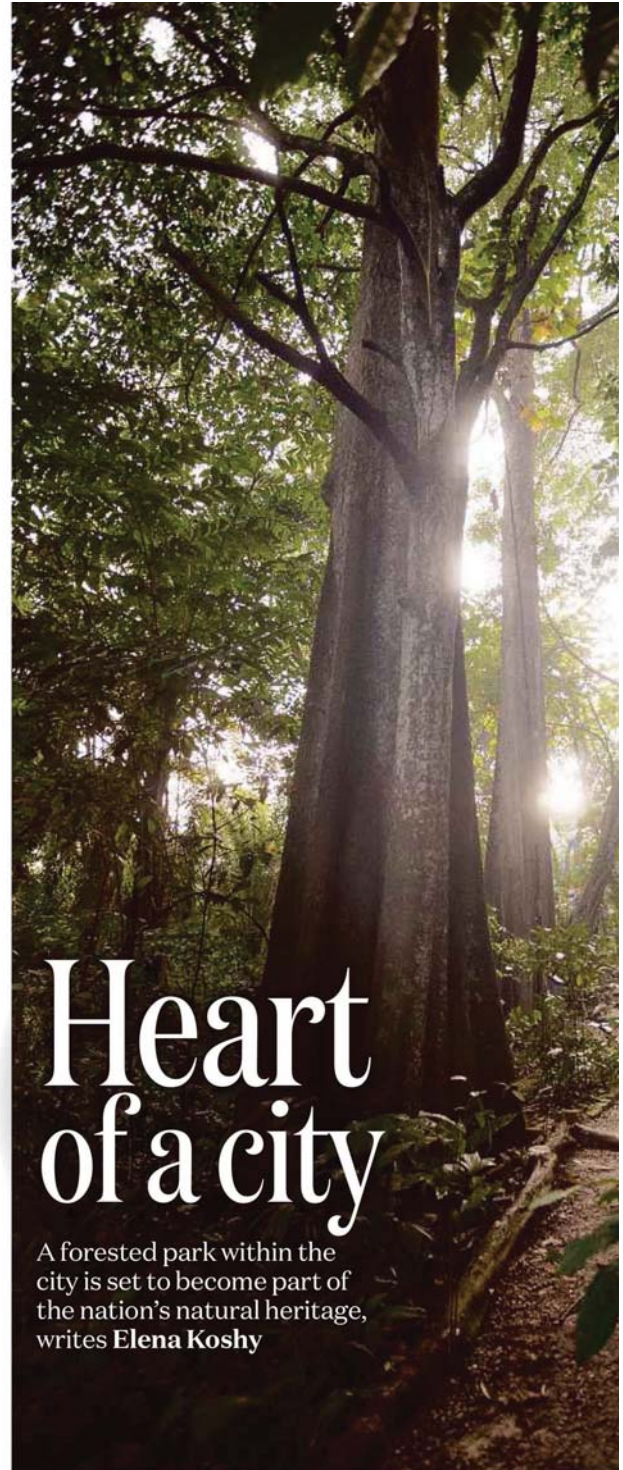
But as Khazanah went on to engage with the local communities and civil society movements as well as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS), they were told: "Look, this is a nice secondary forest area, why not keep the forest and turn it into a park?" After a lot of engagement and dialogues with various groups, Khazanah decided to drop the commercial project, and instead, take it on as a CSR project and convert the land into a forest park in the heart of the city. Enter the Taman Tugu project team — the CSR arm of Khazanah.

"We said we'd take it on under one condition — that this site must be preserved into perpetuity as a public green space," shares Jacob. What Khazanah proposed to the government was that Malaysia adopt the National Trust model that's been carried out in the UK.

The National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty, commonly known simply as the National Trust UK, is an independent charity and membership organisation for environmental and heritage conservation and is the largest membership organisation in the United Kingdom.

Started in 1884 with just one asset, the trust was established under the Companies Act (1862-90). The trust is known as a charity that works to preserve and protect historic places and spaces — for ever, for everyone. Founded in 1895, the trust has been bequeathed with powers to prevent land from being sold off or mortgaged, and can only be overridden by Parliament.

Says Jacob: "Today, the National



Heart of a city

A forested park within the city is set to become part of the nation's natural heritage, writes **Elena Koshy**



The Taman Tugu project team. (From left) Tracey Surin, Calvin Jacob, Mienal Hussin and Engku Safwan.

Headline	Heart of a city		
MediaTitle	New Straits Times		
Date	09 Mar 2019	Color	Full Color
Section	Life & Times	Circulation	36,278
Page No	42,43	Readership	108,834
Language	English	ArticleSize	1746 cm ²
Journalist	N/A	AdValue	RM 60,186
Frequency	Daily	PR Value	RM 180,558



Birds are coming back to the forest. Green Billed Malkoha at Taman Tugu. PICTURE COURTESY OF COLONEL KIM HINN LAI

Trust UK has been incorporated by six separate Acts of Parliament, owns more than 350 heritage assets and is one of the largest landowners in the UK with over 242 811ha of land."

Following its footsteps, the Public Trust to own and manage the Taman Tugu Park will be established under an existing legislation, The Trustees (Incorporation) Act 1952 with just one asset. The trust known as "Amanah Warisan Negara" (Awan) will hopefully, says Jacob, be able to undertake more projects that involve the rejuvenation, rehabilitation and/or operations of selected public spaces together with heritage assets of national significance — as inspired by the National Trust UK. "We're hopeful that this public park will soon be transferred into Awan to be managed and protected for all Malaysians."

TREASURES OF THE FOREST

On the website of the National Trust UK, the following is written: "Prominent social thinker and philanthropist John Ruskin once said: 'The measure of any great civilisation is its cities, and a measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of

its public spaces, its parks and its squares." It's hard to disagree. After all, public parks have a very special place in the heart of a nation.

City parks and open spaces have been known to

improve our physical and psychological health, strengthen our communities and make our cities and neighbourhoods more attractive places to live and work. Numerous studies have shown the social, environmental, economic, and health benefits parks bring to a city and its people. For example, they attract tourists, serve as community signature pieces and form a vital part of our country's culture and history.

In Japan, *shinrin-yoku* or forest bathing — basically going for a stroll in an ancient forest — is a standard form of preventative medicine. Inspired by ancient Shinto and Buddhist practices, nearly a quarter of the Japanese population still enjoys forest bathing today.

There's also a field of study that tries to understand not just why walking in fragrant, old-growth forests is good for us but also how the magic of trees works on humans at a molecular level, in our cells and neurons. The data is compelling: leisurely forest walks reduce heart rate and



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The ecosystem within the park is slowly transforming into the green wilderness it was meant to be; The park currently comprises approximately 4km of forest trails. PICTURE COURTESY OF ELDERS OF OUR FOREST. Remains of old government quarters that once stood within the park are still evident — covered with vines and undergrowth.

blood pressure, decrease sympathetic nerve activity and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

The benefits of having a green space is endless, agrees Jacob, quipping: "The secret to good health might just be a walk in the park!" It's often said that parks mitigate the effects of climate change. Their trees absorb and store carbon and trap particulate matter on leaf surfaces. They absorb storm water runoff, keeping it out of sewers and countering pollution, and they reduce the impact of the urban island heat effect.

He goes on to point out that there have been several noteworthy discoveries found within the area. Walking through the trails, he stops and points at a towering tree that looks a lot like the ubiquitous palm oil trees we see in endless plantations across the country — only much taller. These are believed to be the original trees brought in by the British during Malaysia's colonial days. He explains: "The British initially introduced the palm oil seeds from West Africa, and planted it for ornamental purposes."

The Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) has already identified and tagged 1,000 trees for preservation, including indigenous species such as Jelutong, Tembusu, Pulai and Gaharu — some measuring more than 1-metre in diameter and possibly about a century old!

Plans are afoot, reveals Jacob, to plant more than 4,000 trees within the park. "The idea is to have a rainforest setting eventually with a lot more diversity which will potentially attract more fauna within this area," he says.

It's been a far cry from being an abandoned area and an illegal dumping ground in the past. As the secondary forest develops, Jacob notes the ecosystem is slowly transforming into the green wilderness it was meant to be. "I can see and hear and feel that there are a lot more fauna within this forest. Initially there was just mosquitoes! But there are a lot more insects. I see a lot more dragonflies and

I've even been stung by a bee!" he jokes, before adding: "And that's attracting a lot more birds."

Birds. My eyes light up as I spot a Greater racket-tailed drongo with its distinctive elongated outer tail feathers, flitting through the trees. There are birds, indeed. "We're getting a lot of bird watchers visiting the park," he remarks, adding that to date, there has been more than 20,000 people who have been through the park.

"This space is here for all Malaysians and will be available for them and for generations to come," says Jacob. "But I also hope that people will consider the green spaces within their own areas, and to fight for these places to be preserved. This trust we're establishing is a vehicle to potentially safeguard these spaces."

The Taman Tugu project is currently in collaboration with various public sector agencies, private sector companies and civil-society organisations. "We're planting trees, working with NGOs and groups to organise public engagements and activities within the park, and we'll be working towards ensuring that this patch of forest remain protected into perpetuity," he explains smiling as we walk together past a towering Pulai tree.

"I can't help but reach out to touch its bark in wonder. 'It's amazing, isn't it?' he asks, beaming with pride as I nod my head. Towering trees, little streams and well-kept trails that snake around the park provide a welcome respite from the city smog. "But there's a lot more to do," he confesses as we head back to our parked car.

As Jacob and his team work hard to rehabilitate and protect this little patch of forest, turning it into a veritable Eden of sorts within the city, an old quote by Ernest Hemingway comes to mind: "The earth is a fine place and worth fighting for."

Perhaps it's time, to look around us, and as Jacob hopes, consider our environment and decide what kind of difference we want to make for our future generation.

elenafinst.com.my



Serene environment in the middle of the city. PICTURE COURTESY OF ELDERS OF OUR FOREST

WHERE: Taman Tugu Park
OPENING HOURS: 7am to 6.30pm
ADMISSION: Free
 For details, go to www.tamantuguproject.com.my