

2017 UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation

The 2017 UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation has been awarded to the National Parks Board of Singapore (NParks). The Prize consisting of a diploma, a medal and a cash endowment of USD 70,000 is awarded every alternate year. It was established by a generous endowment by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said of Oman^{1,2}. The award ceremony was held on the first day of the 8th World Science Forum (WSF) in Jordan, from 7 to 11 November 2017, under the auspices of UNESCO³.

The NParks promotes biodiversity in a highly urbanized and land-scarce landscape, with the recovery of habitats and species, and supports the incorporation of biodiversity into all levels of the education system. It is to be noted that Singapore is a city-state and an island-country with an area of 720 km² and population of less than six million (2016). The NParks is one of the numerous statutory boards of the Government of Singapore. In this system, the statutory boards are organizations which have substantial autonomy. The origins of the NParks can be traced to the exercise of tree-planting in the 1960s, which enjoyed the patronage of Lee Kuan Yew, the then Prime Minister of Singapore. Massive tree-planting continued into the 1970s resulting in the National Tree Planting Day (observed in the first week of November) in 1971. Singapore Botanic Gardens (created in 1859) was a natural choice in providing expertise and plant materials. There were several organizational changes, notably the merger of the tree-planting initiative with the Parks & Trees Unit in 1973. This merger led to the creation of Parks and Recreation Department under the auspices of the Ministry of National Development in 1975. The 1975 Parks and Trees Act provided another boost to the greening exercise. Parks and Recreation Department was renamed as the National Parks Board in 1996. With significant achievements in greenery, the vision and mission of the NParks has evolved from a 'Garden City' to 'City in a Garden'. Notably, the NParks manages Singapore's first World Heritage Site, namely the Singapore Botanic Gardens, along with four nature reserves and more than 350 parks⁴.

In 2008, the NParks along with the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (this convention was conceived by the United Nations Environment Programme) developed the 'Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity' (also known as the City Biodiversity Index or simply Singapore Index). Other environmental indices are centred around indicators, including clean water, sanitation, energy efficiency, air quality and waste management. The Singapore Index consolidates the various biodiversity indicators and provides a single index⁵. Singapore Index is an effective self-assessment tool to help cities evaluate and benchmark their biodiversity conservation efforts.

The NParks performs much more than the greening of Singapore. The Board has conducted significant conservation biology research that has resulted in the discovery of new endemic plant and terrestrial invertebrate species⁶. These results have been used by the NParks to design better management plans and facilitate science-based decision-making. The NParks also publishes a wide range of books/manuals/guides on various aspects of environmental concerns⁴. The Board conducts training programmes, provides scholarships and career guidance in environment and related fields. It is also involved in legislation and administration of certain laws related to the environment⁴. The diverse activities and rich experience of the NParks are an excellent example to emulate and can benefit many cities across the globe.

In order to strengthen international efforts in the field of environmental conservation, His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said of Oman declared the establishment of the above-mentioned Prize during his visit to the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France in 1989. UNESCO established the Statutes of the Prize, adopted by the Executive Board at its 132th session in November 1989 (refs 1, 2). According to the Statutes, the Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB) was given the responsibility of selecting the laureates through a jury of members from the MAB Office. The inaugural Prize was awarded in 1991 (to the Instituto de Ecología, Veracruz, Mexico; <http://www.inecol.edu.mx/>). Since then, it has been awarded every biennium. Bet-

ween 1991 and 2001, the Prize-awarding ceremony took place at the UNESCO Headquarters. Since 2003 it is being awarded during the biennial WSF. The UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation accords recognition to outstanding contributions by individuals, groups of individuals, institutes or organizations in the management or preservation of the environment⁷. The deadline for submitting nominations for the 2019 Prize is 15 July 2019 (refs 1, 2). This is the first Arab environmental protection prize to be awarded at the international level⁷. The other major science prizes instituted by the Middle Eastern region are the King Faisal International Prize for Science by Saudi Arabia⁸ and the Mustafa Prize for Science by Iran⁹.

1. UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation, Ministry of Education, Sultanate of Oman, 2017; Publication No. 539/2017, ISBN: 978-99969-0-967-2; <http://www.un-qaboos-prize.net/>
2. UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation; <http://www.un-qaboos-prize.net/>
3. World Science Forum 2017; <https://worldscienceforum.org/> and <http://www.sciforum.hu/>
4. National Parks Board of Singapore; <https://www.nparks.gov.sg/>
5. CBD, *User's Manual on the Singapore Index on Cities' Biodiversity (also known as the City Biodiversity Index)*, *Convention on Biological Diversity*, 2014; <https://www.cbd.int/subnational/partnersandinitiatives/city-biodiversity-index>
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7. Khan, S. A., *Curr. Sci.*, 2016, **110**(1), 15.
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