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It's green and it's great

Here's a happy story where public interest and nature conservation won over commercial interest and profit. May we have more.

I EMERGED from the forest sweat-drenched, with shaky legs and a little tired. But I was also completely elated.

It wasn't just the workout I got from walking the trail in this new urban park that got me so pumped up. It was the sheer joy of knowing that a precious part of Kuala Lumpur is forever out of the reach of greedy politicians and developers.

This is the Taman Tugu project, a not-for-profit corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative by Khazanah Nasional Bhd that conserves 26.7ha of prime land in the heart of the city as an urban secondary forest park that is open to the public free of charge.

The media had been reporting on the project since its inception in 2016 but I never quite took notice, possibly because I was rather cynical as to whether it would really take off during the previous corruption-ridden administration.

Well, after my walk in the park last month, I am delighted to say I was totally wrong in my cynicism. The Taman Tugu project is truly a bright spot that seems to have escaped the taint of super inflated prices and shoddy planning that plagued so many other Najib-era projects.

For this project, Khazanah did everything right and it has the results to prove it.

After it was launched by Najib on Sept 4, 2016, the team in charge of the project won praise for its approach and handling of many issues involved. MP for Serdang Ong Kian Ming, for one, in urging the newly elected Pakatan Harapan government to continue with the project, paid tribute to former Khazanah managing director Tan Sri Azman Mokhtar (who resigned

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post-GE14) and his team for their professionalism and responsiveness.

Ong noted the team invited the public to share their views, briefed the then opposition Members of Parliament like him and many others on the benefits of the project and held dialogue sessions with relevant stakeholders.

The project did attract controversy because of the high cost of RM650mil but Azman took pains to explain the breakdown of how the money would be spent. About 75% was allocated almost equally in three parts for conserving and activating the park, setting up a learning and innovation centre, and linking the surrounding area with connectors, while RM100mil was for operations and maintenance over 10 years.

What is welcome news is that the Taman Tugu project is under a newly set up national public trust, inspired by UK's National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty, better known as the National Trust UK. It is the establishment of this local body that gives me much hope.

The UK model was founded in 1895 and it has stayed true to its

mission of preserving that nation's heritage and open spaces for everyone to enjoy. More importantly, most properties under the National Trust are held inalienably, meaning they can never be sold or developed without Parliament's consent.

As at July 2018, we have Amanah Warisan Negara (Awan) or the National Heritage Trust, set up under the Trustees Incorporation Act (1952).

Its aims: to undertake projects involving "the rejuvenation, rehabilitation and/or operations of selected public spaces together with heritage assets of national significance".

Taman Tugu, the first of such projects, will be protected for perpetuity under Awan. And that is what makes it so awesome because it is a piece of prime forest land, valued at RM2.1bil, that developers would surely love to get hold of.

The entire plan, once completed, will link Taman Tugu via connectors like walkways, overhead bridges and underpasses to surrounding places of interest like Taman Botani Perdana, Muzium Negara and KL Sentral.

The Taman Tugu forest park opened last September and it has

won whole-hearted positive reviews. After my visit, I can see why. There are plenty of first-hand accounts of the park and the forest trails online, so I won't go into detail here.

Suffice to say getting there was easy and the layout and facilities are very, very well done. There are several routes and loops on the trail. My family and I just followed the signs and started walking.

As more seasoned hikers noted, the trail is not a hard one. It is generally flat with some parts requiring going up and down steps. Because of that, it's not wheelchair accessible.

Still, it is decent exercise for the less fit. We went mid-morning after overnight showers and there were the unavoidable muddy and slippery stretches. We were surrounded by mosquitoes when we entered the trail but somehow lost them once we went deeper into the forest.

There is plenty of shade but the humidity and exertion will bring out the sweat. What I loved about the trail was the use of what looked like old construction material like railway sleepers for the steps and old concrete pillars for some of the railing.

A really simple and fun addition were swings at rest areas, which kids and adults found irresistible.

There is also interesting history to the place, long hidden, and finally revealed in well-written information boards.

I also really liked how the gazebos and an observation deck were designed to blend in with the surroundings.

A year on, apart from mild wear and tear of a few signboards, the park is well maintained and the trail is delightfully litter-free, so much so that a piece of used white tissue, whether discarded deliberately or by accident, became an eyesore for

me and I had to pick it up to throw in a proper bin.

While there are other green lungs in the Klang Valley like the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia, KL Forest Eco Park (previously known as the Bukit Nanas Forest Reserve) and Bukit Gasing Forest Reserve, the Taman Tugu park is a wonderful, amazing addition for its size and easy access.

This nation needs more projects like this. Yes, there are so many areas that need fixing like our politics, economy, education system, public housing and so on.

But we also need a different kind of urban development that isn't about another shopping mall, a block of office space or exclusive condominiums. We need places that can be enjoyed by all, regardless of race, age, gender or religion, that bring people together, and parks do just that.

I passed by many fellow Malaysians on that trail. We were all on the same path but we made way for the faster walkers as others made way for us, especially for a senior citizen like me when I had to slow down on those slippery steps.

All over the world, preserving places of historic interest and natural beauty, as what the UK National Trust does, has proven to be a sustainable strategy that can earn huge tourist revenues. That's pretty good reason for doing it but more importantly, we would be protecting these places for ourselves and future generations.

Many of the trees were tagged but Aunty didn't spot any merbau, our new national tree. She would like a revisit to try to look for it. Does anyone want to join Aunty for a walk in the park? Email her at junewonghl@gmail.com