

Golden Years, Green Spaces: A Concept Paper of Designing Recreational Parks for Malaysia's Aging Society

¹Zaherawati Zakaria., *¹Nazni Noordin., ²Mohd Zool Hilmie Mohamed Sawal., ³Nurul Amira Azmi

¹Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

²Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

³Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.13010122>

Received: 21 January 2026; Accepted: 26 January 2026; Published: 07 February 2026

ABSTRACT

Malaysia is undergoing a significant demographic shift as its ageing population steadily increases. In response, this paper explores the need for inclusive recreational park designs tailored specifically for older adults. Grounded in the principles of sustainable development and supported by legal provisions under the Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171), this article highlights how green public spaces can improve the quality of life for senior citizens. It identifies key design elements, such as age-appropriate equipment and social interaction spaces, that support physical health, mental well-being, and community connectivity. Drawing on demographic data and previous research, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift in town planning to address the unique needs of Malaysia's ageing society. Well-designed recreational parks not only enhance seniors' physical and emotional health but also foster intergenerational harmony, contributing to a healthier and more inclusive society.

Keywords: Ageing population, recreational parks, senior citizens, sustainable development, social inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development in Malaysia has been actively pursued as part of the country's broader national development agenda. This commitment gained a more structured and global direction with the introduction of Agenda 21 (also known as Local Agenda 21 or LA21), a product of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), commonly referred to as the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Zainal Md Zan & Kamarudin Ngah, 2016). Local authorities in countries that adopted Agenda 21, including Malaysia, pledged to integrate sustainable development into their respective development strategies (Hill, Terry & Woodland, 2006). Of the 40 chapters outlined in Agenda 21, Chapter 6, which focuses on protecting and promoting human health conditions, stands out as particularly relevant in discussions surrounding today's sustainable development planning challenges.

Among the listed Principles of Sustainable Development, one key emphasis is Quality of Life which addressing the economic, social, and environmental systems that shape communities to provide a healthy, productive, and meaningful life for all residents, now and in the future. At the local government level, this principle can be actualised through several provisions under the Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171). For instance, Section 64 grants authority to "create new public places and so on, and to expand existing ones," providing a legislative foundation for enhancing community well-being.

Excerpt from Section 64 (Local Government Act 1976, Act 171) states that:

A local authority may:

- (a) establish, construct, place, or designate new public places; and
- (b) expand, open, enlarge, or improve any public place deemed necessary under any written law to the owners and occupants of any land, house, or building required for any purpose or affected by it.

One of the public places involved in promoting health to achieve a healthier, more productive, and meaningful quality of life for the community is recreational parks. In Malaysia, numerous playgrounds, recreational, and leisure parks have been developed and regulated by the government, particularly by local authorities. However, most of these facilities primarily focus on children and younger people. But what about the elderly? Do they not require recreational parks that cater specifically to their needs?

This need is becoming increasingly urgent and requires appropriate attention from policymakers and infrastructure planners at all levels of government, whether national, state, or local (Toriman et al., 2025). The rise in Malaysia's elderly population aged 60 and above, from 10% in 2018 to 10.3% in 2019, accounting for 3.4 million out of the total 32.4 million population in 2019 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019) represents a significant demographic that deserves proper consideration.

The appropriate follow-up action by the relevant authorities is to plan and implement the creation of recreational parks tailored for the elderly population in Malaysia. In the past, policymakers and infrastructure developers may have overlooked this issue, but given the current demographic shifts, an urgent paradigm shift is necessary. This reality is supported by Hong (2014), who highlighted that the elderly are often the disadvantaged group when it comes to the use of recreational parks. Many parks do not provide suitable spaces and facilities for this group, mostly aged 60 and above, whose needs naturally differ from those of younger users.

2. The History of Recreational Parks for the Elderly

The first recreational and leisure park dedicated to the elderly was established in China in 1995. It was initiated following the implementation of national law promoting physical fitness programs for all levels of society, including older adults. This practice yielded positive results for China's ageing population and quickly spread to other countries. The concept gained international attention when foreign tourists and visitors were impressed by China's approach and subsequently adapted the idea in their own nations.

For instance, Finland began developing recreational parks for the elderly in 2003, followed by Japan in 2004, and later by Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States in subsequent years. Today, recreational parks for senior citizens can be found across the globe. As a developing nation aspiring to achieve developed country status, Malaysia must act swiftly and follow in the footsteps of these developed nations in this regard.

3. Ideal Design and Features of Recreational Parks for the Elderly

Recreational parks designed for the elderly should fundamentally differ from traditional playgrounds intended for children and younger individuals. These parks must be specifically tailored to meet the distinct, unique, and safe needs of older adults. The design of such recreational spaces should emphasize core strength development and focus on activities such as walking, strength building, and improving flexibility.

Equipment installed in these parks must also consider users with limited mobility or those who rely on wheelchairs. Nevertheless, basic playground elements such as swings and see-saws remain relevant and should be included to allow seniors to relive joyful moments from their youth. The happiness and emotional rejuvenation these experiences bring can breathe new life into their remaining years, contributing to a more meaningful and fulfilling lifestyle.

This initiative also aligns with the government's aspirations to enhance the quality of life for all citizens, including senior citizens. One such effort includes the plan to establish more Senior Citizens Activity Centres or *Pusat Aktiviti Warga Emas* (PAWE) across the country, as emphasized by former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, who also served as the Minister of Women, Family and Community

Development, during the officiation of the new building for the Malaysian Research Institute on Ageing at Universiti Putra Malaysia on 23 September 2019 ("Encouraging seniors to stay active, government aims to build more PAWE", 2019).

4. Suitable Equipment for Recreational Parks for the Elderly

Given the differing needs of the elderly compared to existing recreational parks, the type of equipment required for this age group must also differ. For example, recreational parks for seniors do not need facilities such as slides, toy trains, playhouses, hoops, or monkey bars, which are typically designed for children. Instead, suitable equipment for senior-friendly parks should focus on activities that support strength, balance, flexibility, coordination, and aerobic movement. Additionally, such spaces should foster community interaction and social engagement (Hong, 2014).

Safety and accessibility are fundamental for elderly park users. Equipment must be easy to use which provides clear visual instructions and ergonomic design appropriate for those people. Support safety elements in the infrastructure such as sufficient lighting, ramps with gentle slopes and slip-resistant pathways. Also, proper resting place (Wan Ali et al., 2025).

Whether elderly users are walking, cycling, or using designated trails, the key is that all equipment and facilities provided should promote joy, activity, and a better quality of life for this age group (Playgrounds for Seniors Coming Your Way, 2015).

5. The Need for Recreational Parks for the Elderly

The Malaysian government's efforts to enhance the quality of life and well-being of the elderly population should not rest solely on the shoulders of the government. It is a shared responsibility across all sectors, as ageing is a global issue that affects diverse groups and communities.

The need to establish recreational parks tailored for older adults is becoming more urgent, especially based on projections from the Department of Statistics Malaysia. By 2030, Malaysia is expected to become an ageing nation, with approximately 5.8 million elderly citizens out of a total population of 38.1 million. According to Lin, L. et al. (2023), Lin, C. et al. (2022), and Taylor et al. (2021), well-designed recreational parks for older people can significantly improve their health and overall quality of life. Physical and social activities carried out in green spaces and accessible parks can enhance cognitive function and reduce the risks of anxiety and depression among the elderly (Huat, 2025, Robert et al., 2022).

As a government committed to the well-being of all citizens, continuous efforts must be made to plan effectively for the needs of older adults. These initiatives will help shift public perception from viewing the elderly as burdens to recognizing them as active, productive members of society.

6. The Benefits of Recreational Parks for the Elderly

In life, what matters most is to live with joy and contentment. The elderly are no exception. As individuals enter their later years, they often face loneliness and isolation. Many may have lost their spouses, while their children have grown up and started families of their own, no longer residing with them. This leaves a significant emotional gap, which, if unaddressed, may develop into more serious psychological conditions over time.

In line with the government's aspiration to ensure that every citizen lives a meaningful and quality life, one of the most effective interventions is to provide dedicated public spaces where the elderly can gather, engage in physical activities such as walking, jogging, and light exercise, and foster social interactions. These parks serve as natural remedies for "loneliness syndrome," offering emotional relief and social connectivity. Just like playgrounds bring joy and stimulation to children, a similar concept should be applied to recreational parks for older adults.

As George Bernard Shaw, the renowned Irish playwright and Nobel Laureate in Literature (1925), once said, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing." In this context, building

age-friendly parks is not merely a recreational investment, it is a strategic initiative with benefits that far outweigh the costs.

Exercise and physical activity are essential for maintaining good health and quality of life. Parks designed for the elderly offer more than just a walking space, they provide targeted equipment that encourages movement, enhances mobility, and reduces the risk of boredom and inactivity. These amenities can uplift the emotional well-being of the elderly, creating happier, healthier communities for Malaysia's ageing population.

7. Social Connectivity and Interaction

Recreational parks also serve as vital social spaces where older adults can connect with friends and neighbors. From a social perspective, many elderly individuals experience isolation and loneliness, which can lead to depression. Senior-friendly parks offer opportunities for the elderly to interact with peers who understand and relate to their circumstances. These shared spaces make it easier to build friendships and promote emotional well-being.

Some of the equipment in elderly recreational parks is designed for multiple users, encouraging collaboration, social engagement, and the formation of bonds in a relaxed and enjoyable environment. When older individuals engage in group activities with peers, they can break free from the cycle of monotony and solitude. This, in turn, cultivates a generation of happy, active, and positive senior citizens who continue contributing meaningfully to society.

CONCLUSION

As citizens of Malaysia, the elderly are entitled to access public amenities, including recreational facilities, as stipulated in Section 64 of the Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171), which empowers local authorities to establish such spaces. It is time for governments, especially local authorities, to take proactive and empathetic measures to address the specific needs of this growing demographic. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2019), the elderly population (aged 60 and above) rose from 10.0% in 2018 to 10.3% in 2019, equating to approximately 3.4 million individuals out of the 32.6 million national population. This upward trend will likely continue, demanding serious attention and sustainable infrastructure planning.

Importantly, the development of senior-friendly recreational parks does not require segregation from existing playgrounds for children and youth. Instead, shared public spaces can be designed to include dedicated areas and equipment tailored to the needs of older adults. This approach optimizes land use and resources while promoting inter-generational harmony. Elderly individuals can enjoy these parks with their children and grandchildren, each having designated spaces to play, exercise, and socialize, ultimately nurturing a healthy, joyful, inclusive, and positive Malaysian society.

REFERENCES

1. Cohen, D. A., McKenzie, T. L., Sehgal, A., Williamson, S., Golinelli, D., & Lurie, N. (2007). Contribution of public parks to physical activity. *American Journal of Public Health*, *97*(3), 509–514. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2005.072447>
2. Galakkan warga emas bergiat aktif, kerajaan mahu bina lebih banyak PAWE. (2019, September 24). *Astro Awani*. <https://www.astroawani.com/berita-malaysia/galakkan-warga-emas-bergiat-aktif-kerajaan-mahu-bina-lebih-banyak-pawe-218286>
3. Hill, J., Terry, A., & Woodland, W. (2006). *Sustainable development: National aspirations and local implementation*. Ashgate Publishing.
4. Hong, S. (2014). Their goal: Creating public parks for an aging population. *UCLA Newsroom*. <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/their-goal-creating-public-parks-for-an-aging-population>
5. Huat, L. T. (2025, February 22). Enhance existing facilities to support elderly needs. *The Star*. Retrieved December 31, 2025, from <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2025/02/22/enhance-existing-facilities-to-support-elderly-needs>.

6. Jabatan Perangkaan Malaysia. (2019). **Jumlah penduduk Malaysia**. Department of Statistics Malaysia. <https://www.dosm.gov.my>
7. Lin, C. C., Liu, Y. Y., & Huang, H. C. (2022). The impact of a community-based exercise program on the physical function and quality of life of older adults: A systematic review and meta-analysis. **Journal of Aging and Physical Activity**, *30*(1), 143–154. <https://doi.org/10.1123/japa.2020-0412>
8. Lin, L., Chen, M., & Tan, W. (2023). Designing senior-friendly parks: A review of the literature. **Journal of Housing for the Elderly**, *37*(1), 20–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763893.2022.2105123>
9. Playgrounds for seniors coming your way. (2015). **Senior Planet**. <https://seniorplanet.org/playground-for-seniors/>
10. Roberts, J. M., Ng, C., & Fernandez, R. (2022). Recreational green space and cognitive function in older adults: A systematic review. **International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health**, *19*(1), 118–131. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010118>
11. Taylor, R. S., Green, M. W., & Cohen, L. A. (2021). Creating equitable parks and public spaces for an aging population. **Journal of Planning Literature**, *36*(1), 27–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08854122220940409>
12. Toriman, M.E., Ata, F.M., Mohd Nordin, N., & Shaferi, M.S. (2025). Challenges in Implementing Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in Malaysia: Narrative Review. **Asian People Journal**, *8*(2), 188-206.
13. Wan Ali @ Yaacob, W. N. A., Sulaiman, N., & Hassan, N. (2025). Historic Urban Green Spaces and Elderly Resilience: Insights from Taiping Lake Gardens—A Place in Ageing. *Planning Malaysia Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.21837/pm.v23i38.1862>
14. Zainal Md Zan, & Kamarudin Ngah. (2016). **Agenda 21 di Malaysia: Keberkesanan pelaksanaan**. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.