Publication: The Straits Times, p D2-3
Date: 29 March 2013
Headline: Lead and learn

LEAD AND LEARN

The number of volunteer guides at museums, parks and wildlife reserves here is rising

I silvering your weekends attending lectures, reading and conducting mock exhibition tours sounds like fun rather than work, you may not want to sign up as a docent at museums, parks and wildlife sites here. It means "teaching" in Cantonese. If you love animals, nature, art or history and want to spread that how to others, then docent work could be for you. Volunteer numbers at the National Parks Board have grown two to a third from 2010. More than 400 people help out for free at public parks and gardens with activities such as guided tours and conservation programmes, says director of conservation Wong Teoen, 56.

Those with a passion for animals can volunteer at the Singapore Zoo, Night Safari and River Safari. They have a 360-hour training programme that started in 1997 when the docent programme started, says Ms May Loke, 55, director of education at Wildlife Reserves Singapore. It is looking to introduce fore in Mandai and get more reserves to become docent.

Heritage sites such as the Sultan Mosque in Arab Street and Baba House along Neil Road are also docent hot spots. The programme at the Islamic Mosque was started in 2002 to counter the problem of visitors attending tours handled by tour agencies which sometimes gave "inaccurate information" such as leaving in the wrong direction during prayers, says the mosque’s executive officer Ammawi, 36.

Today, 10 docent tours conducted at the mosque, up from just two in 2002 when the programme started, he says. Most are female retirees aged 60 and above.

A half-day training gives guides information on the mosque’s history and, most importantly, do’s and don’ts — such as wearing proper attire and not shouting. "We have to protect its sanctity," says Mr Ammawi.

The five-year-old docent programme at the Baba House — a heritage house showcasing Straits Chinese culture managed by the National University of Singapore — is one of the newest with 10 guides.

The ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay Sands, which opened in 2011, employs 14 half-time paid docents. It is the only organisation here to pay its docents. It works to reveal how much they are paid.

It often a career to docents as they are in the forefront, delivering the best museum experiences, says associate director Beth Lee, 36.

"It is important that our docents have a passion for the creativity at the heart of art and science and for sharing it with others," he says.