

# **Examining Recreational Activities in UNESCO-listed Botanical Gardens: Kew, Singapore, and Padova**

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How to cite: Bingöl Bulut, M.B. (2024). Examining Recreational Activities in UNESCO-listed Botanical Gardens: Kew, Singapore, and Padova. *Biodiversity Studies (BiSt), 3*(2), 13-18.

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**Article History:** *Received:* 19.12.2024 *Accepted:* 30.12.2024 *First online:* 31.12.2024

# Keywords

heritage sites, botanic gardens, recreation, visitor management

#### Abstract

Botanical gardens have been significant spaces for biodiversity conservation, education, and recreation, playing a crucial role in public engagement. This study examines the recreational opportunities employed by three iconic UNESCO-listed botanical gardens: the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (UK), the Singapore Botanic Gardens, and the Orto Botanico di Padova (Italy). While Kew Gardens integrates structured visitor management, dynamic seasonal events, and inclusivity programs, Singapore Botanic Gardens emphasizes accessible, family-friendly experiences and eco-education within an urban context. Conversely, the Orto Botanico di Padova offers contemplative recreation rooted in its historical design, complemented by modern ecological exhibits. By comparing these gardens, this research highlights the approach they employ to balance recreation with their core missions of conservation and education. Findings highlight the importance of sustainable visitor management practices and the need to address site-specific challenges in botanical gardens.

#### INTRODUCTION

Botanical gardens have long been recognized as vital spaces for the conservation of plant species. They have played a central role in preserving biodiversity and providing resources for scientific research (Wyse Jackson & Sutherland, 2000; Borsch & Löhne, 2014; Gaio-Oliveira et al., 2017; Chen & Sun, 2018), but over time, their role evolved to provide opportunities for education, recreation, and social interaction, which are increasingly recognized as critical for human well being (Chiesura, 2004; Vergou & Willison, 2014; Dodd & Jones, 2022). Botanical one hand, gardens, on the increase environmental awareness as educational centers,

while on the other hand, they offer recreational areas that provide opportunities for passive and active interaction with nature. (Wassenberg et al., 2015; Funsten et al., 2022). These spaces also host cultural and seasonal events, such as exhibitions, concerts, and public celebrations, which enhance their accessibility and social value. Culturally and historically, botanical gardens preserve heritage landscapes, rare plant elements collections, and architectural (Caballero, 2015). However, as these gardens expand their educational and recreational offerings, they must also navigate challenges such as overcrowding, ecological degredation, balancing visitor engagement with and (Chiesura, 2004; conservation priorities

Blackmore et al., 2011; Mounce, 2017).

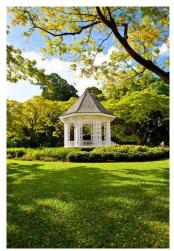
From this perspective, the aim of this study is to investigate the intersections of recreation, education, and conservation within botanical gardens. It seeks to understand how these multifunctional spaces are thoughtfully designed and managed to balance their roles as centers for biodiversity conservation, hubs for educational engagement, and destinations for recreational experiences.

# **Materials and Methods**

In line with the purpose of the study, UNESCO-listed botanical gardens are chosen to examine due to their dual role as cultural heritage sites and conservation hubs. These gardens are globally recognized for both their ecological contributions and their historical and aesthetic (Caballero, 2015). Kew Gardens, was founded in 1759 and was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2003, recognizing its historical, cultural, and botanical significance (UNESCO, 2024) (Figure 1). The Singapore Botanic Gardens, established in 1859, is a tropical garden located near the heart of Singapore's urban core (Figure 2). Inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2015, the garden is recognized for its cultural and historical importance, as well as its role in advancing tropical horticulture and conservation (UNESCO, 2024). The Orto Botanico di Padova, located in Padua, Italy, is the oldest botanical garden in the world still in its original location. Founded in 1545 as part of the University of Padua, the garden was established to cultivate medicinal plants for academic study and remains



Figure 1. Palm House at Kew Gardens (Retrived from:https://whc.unesco.org)



**Figure 2.** The bandstand at Singapore Botanic Gardens (Retrived from:https://whc.unesco.org/)



**Figure 3.** Treetop Walkway, Kew Gardens (Retrived from https://www.kew.org/kew-gardens/whats-in-the-gardens/treetop-walkway)

a prominent center for botanical research and education (Figure 3). In 1997, the Orto Botanico was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List for its historical and scientific significance (UNESCO, 2024).

This study adopts a comparative case study approach to explore how UNESCO-listed botanical gardens balancing their roles as centers for biodiversity conservation, hubs for educational engagement, and destinations for experiences. Case recreational study methodologies are particularly effective in capturing the complexities of multi-functional spaces like botanical gardens, as they allow for a detailed examination of practices across different cultural and ecological contexts (Yin, 2018; Baxter & Jack, 2008). The data collection method for this research involves а comprehensive review of existing literature and documentation. Institutional reports, such as

annual reviews, strategic documents, and management plans provide insights into how these gardens integrate recreation while adhering to conservation mandates. UNESCO documentation, including nomination dossiers and management plans, further illustrates how each garden aligns its recreational offerings with conservation and heritage objectives its (UNESCO, 2024). The key reference documents; The Kew Outreach Strategy 2022–2027 and the World Heritage Site Management Plan 2020-2025 (Kew Gardens) provide insights into Kew Gardens' structured approach to visitor engagement, capacity control, and sustainable tourism. Information regarding the Orto Botanico, Padua was derived from the Periodic Report - Second Cycle, which highlights the challenges and current practices in managing visitor flow and interpretation at this historic site. For the Singapore Botanic Gardens, strategies were derived from the World Heritage Site Management Plan 2024–2028 (Singapore Botanic Gardens) focusing on accessibility, education, and eco-tourism initiatives. This study employs a structured framework to analyze the recreation, conservation, and education programs within UNESCO-listed botanical gardens. The framework was categorized into three key areas:

1. *Recreational-Focused Programs* – Active and passive recreational activities, including social and cultural events.

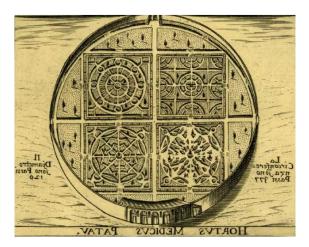
2. *Educational-Focused Approaches* – Public engagement, interpretive displays, and structured learning programs.

3. *Conservation-Focused Strategies* – Sustainable visitor management, biodiversity preservation, and ecological design.

Each botanical garden was examined through this lens to determine how these elements are integrated and balanced.

# **Findings and Discussion**

Building on the structured framework, this section reveals how these gardens interplay between recreation, education and conservation in botanical gardens, particularly those with UNESCO heritage status (Table 1). In terms of active recreation, Kew Gardens, provides dynamic features such as the Treetop Walkway (Figure 4), which offers elevated views of the landscape, alongside seasonal interactive exhibits like light trails (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2023). Singapore Botanic Gardens, on the other hand, prioritizes family-friendly active recreation through the Jacob Ballas Children's Garden (Figure 5), which includes interactive play areas and fitness trails (Singapore Botanic Gardens, 2020). Conversely, the Orto Botanico di Padova focuses less on active recreation due to its historical design, offering walking paths primarily within the Biodiversity Garden (Padova Botanical Garden, 2018).



**Figure 4.** Orto Botanico di Padova, "Orto dei semplici" (the 'simple' plant garden) (Retrived from: https://heritage.unipd.it/en/orto-botanico/)



**Figure 5.** Jacob Ballas Children's Garden, Singapore Botanic Gardens (Retrived from: https://www.nparks.gov.sg/sbg/visit-us/maps-,-a-,brochures)

		Royal Botanic Gardens,	Singapore Botanic	Orto Botanico di
		<b>Kew</b> (UK)	Gardens	Padova (Italy)
<b>Recreation-</b>	Active	-Treetop Walkway for	- Jacob Ballas	-Walking paths in the
Focused	Recreation	elevated views	Children's Garden	Biodiversity Garden
		-Seasonal light trails	-Fitness trails	
	Passive	-Quiet lawns	-Healing Garden -	-Contemplative spaces
	Recreation	-Waterlily House	Symphony Lake	-Renaissance Garden
		-Tranquil garden trails		
	Cultural and	-Seasonal festivals (e.g.,	-Symphony Lake	-Thematic biodiversity
	Social	Orchid Festival)	concerts	exhibitions
	Activities	-Outdoor concerts	-Guided tours and	-Guided historical tours
		-Art exhibitions	cultural events	
Education-	Educational	-Interactive exhibits	- Eco-education	-Workshops on
Focused	Programs	-Guided tours	workshops	biodiversity at 19th
		emphasizing conservation	- Nature trails with	Century Greenhouses
		and history	interpretive signage	-Historical exhibits in
				the Biodiversity Garden
				-The Botanical Museum
Conservation-	Unique	-Palm House	- National Orchid	-Goethe's Palm
Focused	Features	-Temperate House	Garden	-Renaissance-era
		-Treetop Walkway	- Integration of	circular design
			tropical biodiversity	-Oldest academic
			-Heritage trees	garden still in original
			5	location
	Visitor	-Enhances visitor	- Promotes an	-Basic visitor amenities
	Management	experience throuh	immersive	-Visitor use is managed
		interpretation, festivals	experience with	but lacks a specific plan
		and events	clear educational	for crowd control.
		-Storytelling aligned with	themes, highlighting	-Interpretive resources
		conservation goals	heritage and	to fully highlight the
		-Programs for	biodiversity.	site's heritage.
		underrepresented groups	-Free entry for all	-Primarily reflective
		-Sensory tours for	visitors	spaces
		accessibility	-Inclusive facilities	-Limited data on visitor
		-Manages visitor flow	for families	impacts; some
		through timed entries,	-Open access with	monitoring exists but
		pre-booking systems, and	natural circulation;	needs improvement.
		capacity limits.	utilizes large spaces	
		-Digital tools enhance	to minimize	
		accessibility	overcrowding.	
		-Regular monitoring of	-Comprehensive	
		visitor impacts and	monitoring ensures	
		conservation efforts.	minimal ecological	
			impact and	
			improves visitor experiences.	

**Table 1.** Recreational activities at three botanic gardens.



**Figure 6.** Symphony Lake, Singapore Botanic Gardens (Retrived from: https://www.sso.org.sg/whats on/symphony-in-the-gardens-2024-july)

Passive recreation zones are a common feature across all three gardens, providing visitors with spaces for relaxation and contemplation. Kew Gardens offers expansive lawns for picnics, quiet areas like the Waterlily House, and numerous garden trails that foster tranquil experiences (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2023). Similarly, the Singapore Botanic Gardens includes wellness-oriented spaces such as the Healing Garden and Symphony Lake, designed to promote relaxation and stress reduction (Singapore Botanic Gardens, 2020). The Orto Botanico di Padova, deeply rooted in its Renaissance heritage, emphasizes passive recreation through contemplation gardens, seating areas, and reflective spaces set against its historic structures (Padova Botanical Garden, 2024).

Cultural and social activities are integral to the recreational offerings of these gardens. Kew Gardens hosts a variety of events, including seasonal festivals like the Orchid Festival, outdoor concerts, and art exhibitions that appeal to diverse audiences (Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2023). The Singapore Botanic Gardens also places strong emphasis on cultural engagement with Symphony Lake concerts (Figure 6), cultural celebrations, guided tours, and educational workshops (Singapore Botanic Gardens, 2020). Meanwhile, the Orto Botanico di Padova focuses on thematic exhibitions related to biodiversity and guided tours that emphasize its historical and ecological significance (Padova Botanical Garden, 2024).

#### CONCLUSION

This study explored the recreational activites of Kew Gardens; Singapore Botanic Gardens; and Orto Botanico di Padova to investigate how these gardens integrate recreation while maintaining their core missions of conservation and education. The findings indicate that each garden adopts distinct approaches based on its historical context, ecological priorities, and visitor engagement strategies. Kew Gardens successfully balances active and passive recreation through structured visitor management and diverse cultural Singapore Botanic Gardens programming. emphasizes family-friendly and wellnessfocused recreation, integrating accessible green spaces with eco-educational initiatives. In contrast, Orto Botanico di Padova, constrained by its historical layout, prioritizes passive and contemplative recreation while incorporating modern biodiversity education.

Botanical gardens serve as multifunctional spaces, fulfilling roles in biodiversity conservation, education, and recreation. Their management requires a delicate balance between these objectives, particularly in UNESCO-listed gardens, where conservation and heritage preservation are prioritized. However, the expansion of recreational programming in botanical gardens presents both opportunities and challenges. While interactive exhibits and cultural events can enhance visitor engagement, they may also divert attention from conservation objectives or contribute to visitor overuse of ecologically sensitive areas. To address these

botanical gardens must adopt concerns, sustainable visitor management strategies, such as clear zoning for recreation and conservation, capacity control measures, and interpretive education programs to reinforce their ecological missions. Findings suggest that botanical gardens that successfully integrate education into recreational activities can enhance public engagement while upholding conservation priorities. Passive recreation remains the preferred approach due to its minimal environmental footprint, while carefully planned active recreation can serve as an effective tool for engagement without disrupting conservation efforts.

Future research could expand on these findings by conducting visitor surveys to better understand preferences and satisfaction levels. Additionally, analyzing the financial and operational impacts of recreational programming on conservation efforts would offer deeper insights into how botanical gardens can sustain their multi-functional roles in urban environments.

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