

**Leadership in Action**  
**A Strategic Approach to Healthy Parks Healthy Cities – Lessons from Japan**

Leadership for World Urban Parks is based around “making a difference”. Through my contact with members, I see this every day and at all levels and with my most recent trip to Japan, I was able to spend time with the leadership group of WUP Japan.

A group of individuals highly committed to the value of urban parks and to the long journey, have taken up the challenge to solve the chronic health challenges and have adopted an approach that is strategic, tactical, thoughtful and vertically integrated.

I have recently met with our WUP Japan colleagues in Kyoto to discuss their approach to creating new cities and addressing the chronic health challenges and especially that of an aging population. Japan’s population is declining and aging at a rapid rate (by 2060, 40% of the population will be over 65). This is resulting on a significant increase in the health burden as the majority of health cost occur in the last 10 years of an aging population.

The Japanese park leaders have been for the last ten years developing concepts and approaches to address these societal health issue and to ensure that parks and open space are a key part of the solution. The challenge is the same challenge that I observe in all countries around the world.

They originally commenced their journey thru international comparisons, hosting forums such as the Awaji 2015 – International Symposium – The Future of Park Management, building research support and developing a brand – called Parks & Health (Keep fit at the park).

They now have developed a three-tiered approach that is both strategically and tactically smart.

**Local – Program level**

They have trialled an approach at a park and activity level, called the “Park trainer project, Urban Park as preventive health agency”. This program is replicable but defines the concept of Health Rangers extremely well. It also recognises that park staff will need to have sports, health and physical exercise competencies and that future staff will have degrees that incorporate these competencies. The program has a robust science and social underpinnings and can easily further concepts such as RxParks. They have been developing this concept in Japan for a number of years and the [short report](#) provides further details (please read the brief report from our WUP Japan members – Japanese and English).

**Regional – City-wide**

Furthermore, they have been developing the concept of park “wellness centres” (*regional comprehensive care system*) as a response to the aging population and chronic health issues in Japan, the concept is well thought through but has yet to be piloted on the ground. However, there is no real



example anywhere in the world that they can learn from and thus this is an innovation we all should be following. The [short report](#) provides further details (please read the brief report from our WUPJapan members – Japanese and English).

### **International Level**

There is a recognition that if there isn't an international framework that Governments from National through to Local Government will respond to, it will be difficult to build the case for park health solutions. For example, WHO has set guidelines for healthy cities, however, there is no mention or recognition of the role parks, nature and greenspace can play and the only measure is "Physical environment: percentage of green areas / parks". Therefore, Governments at all levels only need to consider the quantum and not the benefits of parks. In Japan, Governments are guided by these types of international requirements. The [short report](#) provides further details (please read the brief report from our WUP Japan members – Japanese and English)

The Japanese park leaders have recognised that it is important to improve these standards and that there is a need for WUP to set a clearer policy regarding Healthy Parks Healthy Cities and potential framework for standards recognising that every Cities context is different and that key partners such as IUCN and ICLIE have influential roles.

Their understanding of settling an international context is wise and appropriate. They understand that governments and local authorities respond to international requirements and not just broad policies. The WUP Japan have offered to provide leadership in this area as part of the Advocacy Portfolio and that they have a direct relationship with WHO *Centre for Health Development* (Kobe, Japan).