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Tree climbing has not caught on in Singapore as it is still considered a frivolous sport

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BODY:

TREE climbing is far from child's play, but some people are not convinced. Mr Johnnie Wong, 61, says: 'When I tell people that I climb trees, their instant reaction is, 'Oh, you monkey ah?''

The retiree shrugs off such jibes and practises climbing about once a month, mostly at Sembawang Park. He first gave the sport a shot in 2002 after catching a TV programme that featured Singapore's first and only **tree-climbing** club, Sunny Island Tree Climbers Society.

He has scaled trees as high as 33m, the approximate height of a 10-storey block of flats, and says: 'I find it very exciting to climb to such heights.'

Tree climbing was introduced as a hobby here by Ms Valerie Law, then an undergraduate at the Nanyang Technological University, when she set up the Sunny Island club in 2000.

But it has not caught on. At its peak, Sunny Island had about 30 members, ranging from a six-year-old girl to retirees like Mr Wong. There is a core group of only about six now. 'Most people just come and go,' says Ms Law, 26.

Now a journalist, she first learnt about this unique sport from a website (www.treeclimbing.com). In 2000, she got a training certificate from Tree Climbers International, an association based in the United States. She completed a 10-day course in Georgia and completed 20 climbs at different heights and places.

Mr Wong believes that the portrayal of **tree climbing** as 'low-end and frivolous' instead of a serious recreational activity has hurt its image.

He recalls an episode of a variety show which featured **tree climbing** about three months ago. 'The hosts didn't seem to take it very seriously and only climbed to a height of about 6 to 9m.'

Such treatment trivialises the sport and makes it look like a game, he says.

Instead of using the kampung style which relies on limbs, members of Sunny Island scale trees using equipment such as ropes and gloves.

The club has permission from the National Parks Board to climb trees in three parks - Marina City Park, Pasir Ris Park and Kent Ridge Park. Others who wish to do so have to get a licence from the NParks.

The National Environment Agency says there is no fine for climbing a tree without a permit, but if the tree is damaged, the offender will have to pay for the damage.

An NParks spokesman says it does not encourage the public to climb trees because most people are inexperienced.

Indeed, safety is a concern that puts people off the sport, says Mr Gerald Boh, 33, a physical education teacher who has been climbing trees since 2002.

'There is the myth that **tree climbing** is dangerous. Actually it is very safe - I have not known of any casualties to date,' he says, adding that he plans to set up a new society for climbing enthusiasts.

The joy of climbing, he says, is when one reaches the top and sees the beautiful scenery. 'You then truly feel that it is a wonderful activity where you get to discover nature.'