

Urban National Parks

The Evolution of National Parks and Equitable Conservation into the Urban Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Urban National Parks are uniquely situated not only to provide ecological refuge within the human-dominated built environment, but also to provide a space to reconcile our collective relationship with nature. If these spaces are not protected in equitable ways, with fair access and opportunity grounded in community placemaking, they might merely represent another form of NIMBYism (not in my back yard). In the context of dynamic changes and unprecedented threats to the stability of the natural world, we should look to Urban National Parks as spaces for reconciliation between utilitarian needs and the conservation of nature. What guidelines might urban planners, landscape architects, and ecological designers use to ensure this process is conducted in an equitable way? This paper seeks to put forth a framework for understanding and addressing these problems in the face of climatic and sociopolitical change.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All National Parks and federal public lands are the ancestral homelands of indigenous American peoples. Their rights, access, and stewardship of these places are integral to both land and people. Through these words of acknowledgement, their contemporary and ancestral ties to the land and their contributions to the National Parks are renewed and reaffirmed.

Founded upon a fervent belief in the collective stewardship of shared natural and cultural resources, National Parks are central to the identity and character of the American landscape. In resource conservation, a critical analysis of how National Parks bridge the divide between the natural and cultural (or human-dominated) world is vital. When these spaces about the ever-expansive built environment, does an integration into the urban landscape change their core mission? Incorporating conservation into places we do not typically consider ecologically significant challenges traditional conceptions and represents a new frontier in conservation, signifying a novel type of public landscape: the Urban National Park (UNP). From San Francisco's Golden Gate National Recreation Area to The National Mall & Monuments in Washington D.C., UNPs integrate cultural and natural landscapes into the fabric of American cities, denoting an innovative form of federal public lands. However, further examination highlights that the creation of these spaces within the matrix of urban centers holds the potential for parks and open space to merely represent another form of NIMBYism (not in my back yard). That is, there is a risk that conservation might be used as a cover for protectionist attitudes that oppose certain development, like public housing or services.¹ This should not be

considered effective conservation because it exists within a far greater history of marginalization and stems from problematic perspectives on equity and access to public lands.

Deliberate planning and design must be engaged to prevent exclusion from these important places and to equitably utilize shared resources to benefit all. While National Parks have an admirable aim to provide space “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people,” critically analyzing the formation of these landscapes presents a troublesome impasse: in this urban context, who are ‘the people?’² In the prevailing perspective, if ecologists, planners, designers, and land managers are to meet the long-stated aim of National Parks, they must examine this question in both the establishment and curation of these landscapes. When consciously designed and managed, UNPs are uniquely situated to provide unparalleled ecological protections and equitable access to the measurable benefits of engagement with nature in ways that conventional national or municipal parks do not.

““ While National Parks have an admirable aim to provide space “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people,” critically analyzing the formation of these landscapes presents a troublesome impasse: in this urban context, who are ‘the people?’”²

Customarily, National Parks were established to set aside large swaths of seemingly unaltered, pristine landscapes far from metropolitan areas. UNPs, on the other hand, are located within or directly

adjacent to city cores. This is notable because it designates, on a federal level, that environmental protections of the landscape represent the highest potential value for urban land.³ This perspective is important because it recognizes conservation as the highest and best use, not only in places like rural Wyoming's Yellowstone National Park (emblematic of the National Parks System), but within the core of metropolitan cities. By creating new National Park units designated as UNPs, we can generate an opportunity for direct, accessible engagement with federal public lands to the over 80 percent of Americans who now live within urban areas.⁴ UNPs are not only a sanctuary for nature, but also a refuge for city dwellers who benefit from the psychological, social, and cultural ecosystem services and health benefits these places provide through outdoor activities.⁵

To incorporate UNPs equitably into cityscapes, designers and planners need to reconcile how and where the foundational concepts from works like Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature*, Anne Whiston Spirn's *The Granite Garden*, and Aldo Leopold's *Land Ethic* apply to the conservation of urban ecology in the 21st century.^{6,7,8} In this modern urban context, the UNP might provide the framework for realizing these principles. If we are willing to take steps such as densifying the areas within and around cities to create space for UNPs, then we can concurrently conserve ecosystems we collectively rely upon and seek to protect.

Moreover, these spaces can directly remove both physical and social barriers to accessing shared landscapes. In theory, this is a clear and commendable goal, but without conscious planning, UNPs can be ineffective conservation mechanisms. UNPs should not be used for NIMBYism, nor should they be used as leverage to develop otherwise undisturbed natural areas outside of the city boundary. As federal lands, these networks can be deliberately incorporated into regional planning, avoiding or reducing

the hyper-fragmentation of ecosystems that places patches of natural landscape within built-up areas.⁹

The central conundrum, the question of who has access, highlights the importance of evaluating the characteristics of UNPs that might rectify inequities and eliminate barriers. If preserving the landscape does not serve the needs of the people within the city, then the benefit and enjoyment must be for the advantage of others outside the community. UNPs should not be created for those whose resources and privileges allow them disproportionate access to these benefits. There is a risk that these spaces – heralded as ecological refuge, cultural sanctuary, and public health panacea – might ultimately exacerbate social inequity. When addressing these inequities, we must ask what role urban design as conservation can play in a time of global anthropogenic climatic change, where human hands mark even the most remote landscapes. In the broad context of resource protection, is there truly a distinction between the urban, the rural, and the wild? And how can the benefits from this resource protection be shared in an equitable way? While certainly not a complete nor an exhaustive analysis of this multi-faceted issue, this paper seeks to explore these urgent questions and themes, ultimately proposing a framework for how designers might address these challenges.

PRIORITIZING NATURAL SYSTEMS IN EQUITABLE WAYS

UNPs differ from both traditional national and municipal parks because they represent a directly accessible shared landscape whose ownership and stewardship, grounded in resource conservation, has far greater potential to be equitable. With the explicit aim of protecting resources for all Americans, conventional National Parks and their benefits symbolize a shared American culture.¹⁰ But they are a piece of the culture

not enjoyed equitably by all Americans. Meanwhile, more localized municipal parks, with few exceptions from ecologically progressive communities, do not evoke the spirit of shared resource protection in the ways that National Parks do.

The concept of the National Park system is profoundly democratic: collective ownership of the most ecologically and culturally unique landscapes in the country. In theory, every tax-paying citizen is a stakeholder in the stewardship of these resources. However, access to these places has historically been grossly unequal. Participation that requires the means to take time off from work and pay for entrance, accommodation, and transportation is deeply alarming and antagonistic to how we view these mutual landscapes. Furthermore, analysis of spatial relationships between National Parks and minority populations show that there is a clear relationship between visitation and the location where a majority of minority populations live, one that is “disproportionately represented at closer and smaller national parks.”¹¹

This highly inequitable access frames National Parks as a commercialized commodity to experience rather than a landscape we collectively own and benefit from. While this is a problem that has long plagued the National Park system, the increasing reliance on automotive transit has made traveling to these remote areas

more difficult for lower-income populations, placing our parks in the unfavorable light of ecotourism on public landscapes. Not only are conventional National Parks far away from where the majority of people live, they are intentionally designed landscapes made to accommodate vehicle traffic. Incentivized by motor fees as a source of revenue for the parks, the National Park Service (NPS) deliberately created opportunities for car-reliant sightseeing into the design and management of parks to attract more motorists.¹² As a result, cars have become the primary if not sole way to access many National Parks.

While effectively designed to minimize the destruction of resources and direct the inevitable and otherwise unregulated flow of traffic coming to the National Parks, this integration of roads and motorist accommodations into the management of these spaces creates an impediment to traveling to and navigating within the parks for those without access to a car. Furthermore, these reciprocal dependences on cars and their related necessary infrastructure has become a challenge to the modern management of the parks; these sensitive landscapes cannot handle the burden of those that visit. We are quite literally loving these places to death.¹³ Even more alarming, this burden is for the enjoyment of an overwhelmingly white population.¹⁴

These landscapes are intended to be owned



Figure 1. Cars and crowds along Glacier National Park's "Going-to-the-Sun Road" (Pritchard, 2018).

equally by all Americans, not just those with the means to utilize them. While these inequities are certainly not surprising given America's troubled history of inequality and racism, designers and conservationists must acknowledge them while integrating green space into the built environment to avoid similar exclusionary mistakes.

While National Parks in American culture may reflect shared values and experiences, in practice there is a dilemma of unequal access and benefits.¹⁵ It is time these values and experiences are more equitably dispersed and more representative of all Americans. UNPs exemplify a step in the right direction by taking down geographic barriers to access, representing potential for places of ecological conservation to be shared equally by all Americans.

When conservation of these natural systems does not provide equitable access, it also prevents equal access to the measurable benefits of interacting with quality nature. Research shows that spending time outside and interacting with the surrounding ecosystem improves cognitive function through Attention Restoration Theory (ART), reduces stress through marked decreases in cortisol levels, and increases overall well-being.^{16, 17, 18} These proven benefits further solidify the need for high-quality nature reserves located closer to the urban core with equal access for all, as provided in the NPS mission.

Practitioners should be aware of the potential for UNPs to be commandeered to further aggravate social inequity. If those who can whisper in the ear of the decision-maker support only landscape conservation that directly benefits them personally (in wealth, health, or otherwise), it cannot be considered democratic. Moreover, if these spaces are protected in ways that benefit the few over the many, they should not be considered successful acts of conservation. When conservation is used to strictly oppose rational, environmentally attentive development proposals, then the act is not

actually conservation, but a thinly veiled critique of the project, echoing a sentiment that sounds an awful lot like "not in my back yard!"

How do we remedy this? By ensuring that there is space and access for all. UNPs are uniquely situated to create more accessible federal public lands that are utilized by non-traditional user groups. UNPs can designate ecological conservation as a highest and best land use closer to the city core. These spaces often operate on different scales than the conventional National Park by having a direct relationship with the built environment and providing an unparalleled opportunity for equitable access.

RETHINKING THE NATIONAL PARK: "THE TROUBLE WITH URBAN NATIONAL PARKS"

Understanding that there is a need for more equitable access to our National Parks (and federal public lands more broadly) is only half the story. As we concurrently reexamine our relationship to nature, perhaps we need to rethink how landscape conservation occurs within the built environment and ultimately what a National Park is. As William Cronon suggested in his 1995 paper, "The Trouble with Wilderness," there is a central paradox in our relationship to nature:

Wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not.¹⁹

This incorrect notion that nature is a place devoid of humans has deep consequences for the UNP. At risk of stating the obvious, the converse of this must then be true – the urban landscape is never devoid of the natural.

The idea that nature and humanity are intrinsically intertwined is central to the field of urban ecology and design. Highlighting this perspective that humans are part of nature rather than separate from it allows us to use the vision of the National Park as a tool for conservation in urban spaces. To do so, we need a set of beliefs and principles to guide us in establishing and managing these spaces.

National Parks were originally intended to be “for the benefit and enjoyment of the people,” protecting pristine natural resources and setting them aside as refuges of the wild landscape.²⁰ Since then, the NPS has evolved into an agency that also prioritizes the preservation of cultural resources, and even environmentally degraded land ripe for ecological restoration, engaging in community revitalization throughout their jurisdiction.²¹ Perhaps this – the bridge between human and nature in the urban landscape – is the

agency’s next evolution. Are we not a part of the nature we seek to protect?

Climate change has underscored our role as an inseparable part of global natural systems. Even the most remote wild landscapes are now impacted by human activity at the urban core.²² This is fundamentally changing the way we view the NPS and its role in conservation. Broad threats to resource conservation link landscapes and regions in a new, undeniable way. There is a profound need to create functional ecosystems through parks and open space within the built environment. To protect the far-off landscapes delineated by traditional National Parks, we must also recognize the need for simultaneous and deliberate conservation efforts at the urban core. The two are inseparable. In recognizing this, we can look to the National Parks as a model for conservation within the matrix of the urban landscape.



Figure 2. Overlooking the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (Pritchard, 2016).

As Ian McHarg first called for decades ago in his seminal work *Design with Nature*, we should prioritize the conservation of spaces that have the highest potential for protecting ecological value, targeting development within a matrix of suitable areas aimed at doing the least environmental harm.²³ He coined the term “Urban Suitability Selection Process,” which recognizes that our “cities are not comprised entirely of buildings, and countryside is not entirely without them.”²⁴ Through this process, he proposes that designers examine the landscape to define areas that are “preponderantly suitable for urban uses” while requiring the conservation of those spaces throughout the region where ecosystem function is the best use.²⁵

Applying this framework to a contemporary understanding of restoration ecology and design, there is an opportunity to restructure what we conceptualize as the built environment of our cities and concurrently reshape their ‘nature.’ Because of the level of ecosystem disturbance in all modern metropolitan landscapes, we should not only look to the most obvious, most pristine or unique places, but also attempt to build spaces for stewardship and ‘nature’ into the very fabric of communities.

The NPS can help fill this role of urban landscape steward while simultaneously requiring a rethinking of how public lands are integrated into urban landscapes and how they might serve functional roles in the community. Through conscious design, these spaces can encompass a network of affordable residences, address food security through community gardens, and create opportunities for public gathering – all while protecting sensitive natural and cultural resources.

The trouble with creating National Parks in urban landscapes is that they are often viewed as places where these types of community resources do not occur. Can UNPs, with views of the built environment, perhaps devoid of natural vistas and

the environmental splendor fueling ecotourism, step up and realize the NPS mission to protect resources and revitalize communities? For example, how might the opportunity to restore a remnant prairie on an abandoned lot in Detroit equate to the National Park’s grandiose displays of majestic nature? Without the allure of a traditional National Park, such as Yosemite’s Half Dome or Yellowstone’s Old Faithful, can we create park units that focus on repairing and connecting people to the land they call home?

McHarg highlights that the land use patterns driven by the American dream failed to recognize “that a subdivision is not a community” or that “the sum of subdivisions that make a suburb is not a community,” and that “the sum of suburbs that compose the metropolitan fringe of the city does not constitute community nor does a metropolitan region.”²⁶ Reconciling the need for community-based placemaking with the restoration of ecosystem function is a common goal across disciplines – from ecological design and urban agriculture to applied ecology and beyond.^{27,28} We should look to Urban National Parks as a place for this collaboration to occur.

“ It is important for practitioners to reconcile conservation and community because if they do not consciously consider these issues, UNPs might suffer the same fate as many conventional national or municipal parks: becoming playgrounds for the elite with often ineffectual protections for ecosystem functions.”

It is important for practitioners to reconcile conservation and community because if they do not consciously consider these issues, UNPs might suffer the same fate as many conventional national or municipal parks: becoming playgrounds for the elite with often ineffectual protections for ecosystem functions. Designers must avoid what Anne Whiston Spirn describes as “delightful, but superficial, manifestations of nature” that “ignore the underlying natural processes.”²⁹ This discussion is particularly pertinent today because the lines between urban, rural, and wild are increasingly blurred. Spirn argues:

Real solutions to the problems of both city and suburb can now be achieved only through understanding the place of each within the larger region and by viewing city, suburbs, and countryside as a single, evolving system linked by the processes of nature and the social and economic concerns of humans.³⁰

Pairing conservation with regional design is relevant to the ecologist, landscape architect, and planning practitioner because design is the common ground between implementing scientific knowledge and meeting the needs and values of society.³¹ Creating UNPs is a way to structure these design goals while simultaneously breaking down the physical and social barriers of access to public lands. Aldo Leopold’s holistic *Land Ethic* is poignant in this evaluation of land use, conservation, and community. He recognizes the need

to reevaluate our relationship to the land and develop an ethical perspective towards how we utilize natural resources in non-exploitative ways:

A land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.³²

If we follow the philosophies of Cronon, McHarg, Spirn, and Leopold, as most professionals claim to, we must recognize the need for UNPs to be different than the traditional model of a National Park. UNPs must represent a place for the future of conservation and community to converge in the urban landscape.

Our greatest advances in conservation and community come when we are willing to re-envision the way we operate under conventional systems that aim to protect natural landscapes. We often fall short due to the societal obstacles of equitable access and inherent biases that are built into our design. Natural and cultural resources are all around us. Once we acknowledge this, we can begin to create communities intrinsically tied to the natural world. We need to seek the most equitable and democratic way of protecting biodiversity through deliberate design that restores natural systems, rehabilitates cultural resources, and establishes unbiased access to the land. This is the Urban National Park.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack Pritchard is a graduate student in the School for Environment and Sustainability pursuing dual Master's degrees in Conservation Ecology and Landscape Architecture. Prior to coming to the University of Michigan, Jack obtained his Bachelor of Science in Landscape Architecture and Natural Resources from Cornell University and worked with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and National Park Service on the Trails Stewardship Crew at Golden Gate National Recreation Area. He was recognized as a 2018 Wyss Scholar for the Conservation of the American West and works as a live-in Caretaker at the University of Michigan's Nichols Arboretum. He is currently writing his thesis on the intersection of trail design and forest restoration at Redwood National and State Parks. Jack is an avid fly fisher, backpacker, and amateur botanist.

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