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Open Spaces in Urban Places

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Natural spaces in urban places

Will natural greenspace be properly identified in local development plans, and will local authorities be willing to pursue acceptable standards of provision for the kind of urban greenspaces people want? John Box and Carolyn Harrison look at the issues and put forward minimum targets for accessible natural greenspace in urban areas.

The development of policies concerned with urban greenspace can be related to two areas of land use planning: one based in the tradition of recreation planning and a concern with open space hierarchies and recreational standards; the second concerned with an emerging understanding of the ecology of cities and the requirements to conserve important wildlife habitats and geological features. Rather less success has been achieved in developing policies which acknowledge that an improvement in the quality of life for the people who live and work in cities comes from their *direct* experiences of a variety of natural landscapes. We argue here that part of the 'green space policy challenge' identified recently by Kidd¹ is an urgent requirement to set minimum targets for accessible natural landscapes in urban areas.

This challenge has not been addressed for several reasons. First, while there may be a consensus about what the urban greenspace resource constitutes, there is little agreement about what to call the natural components of this resource. Second, there is a reluctance to acknowledge that the enjoyment and the experience of naturalistic landscapes and settings is a distinctive form of recreational activity in its own right, and that provision for these activities should have a priority at least as great as that of other acknowledged recreational activities. Third, much of the reluctance of local authorities to set minimum targets for open space provision lies in their difficulty in defending such targets at appeal, owing to the lack of an agreed justification.

The prospects for stronger protection for open spaces in urban areas have been enhanced by the Planning and Compensation Act 1991, which affirms the important role of development plans, and by recent policy guidance from the Department of the Environment on general principles for the planning system (PPG 1, March 1992), on development plans (PPG 12, February 1992) and on sport and recreation (PPG 17, September 1991). Not only do environmental factors and natural processes need to underlie comprehensive planning for urban development,² but the interaction between natural and social factors must also be taken



Fishing at the Sneyd Reservoir, Walsall, close to the M6 motorway
(Photograph: P. Wakeley, English Nature)

into account if satisfactory provision is to be made for the needs of people in urban areas. There remains a question mark over whether natural greenspace will be identified in development plans and over the willingness of professionals in the field to pursue acceptable standards of provision for the kinds of accessible natural greenspaces which people demand. We address these issues first, before turning to the question of minimum targets for the provision of these landscapes.

Extent and character of urban natural resources

There are four main types of greenspaces in urban areas:

- remnants of natural systems (woods, lakes, rivers);
- agricultural land (arable land, pastures, hedges);
- private gardens and public parks;
- habitats which develop on disused urban and industrial sites.

An important feature of the last category is that these natural greenspaces are often temporary because they develop on dormant land awaiting development. At any moment an open space covered in colourful plants may be lost to a new office block or a housing development. The communities of vegetation

which develop on such sites are examples of the early stages in the colonisation of bare ground. The processes of natural succession will mean that the habitats are changing from pioneer communities to more mature habitats (e.g. long grass, thorn and willow scrub, woodland).

The planning system needs to take into account the dynamism both in the provision of sites as part of the ongoing development cycle and in the vegetation which develops on these sites. A constant supply of disused sites will favour the early successional communities, which are often the most ecologically interesting and of greatest nature conservation value as they are much less common than long grass, thorn scrub or woodlands. However, local people can feel a real sense of loss when temporary sites which are accessible are developed. Significant public opposition to the development of such sites is both an indication of their amenity value and of the extent to which public policy lags behind widely shared public values.

Inventories of open land undertaken by urban wildlife groups, often in conjunction with local authorities, have revealed how unexpectedly rich urban areas are in terms of wildlife habitats and geological features. There is an enormous variety of natural greenspace in urban areas, ranging from statutory sites (Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Nature Reserves) to local sites which are

adopted and looked after by individuals and groups. Some local authorities have developed nature conservation strategies and policies for protecting these sites. But not all urban areas have been surveyed and not all authorities have adopted the kind of model policies suggested by English Nature for protecting and enhancing them.³

Planners, landscape architects, ecologists, conservationists and parks and leisure managers use different terms to define the 'urban green',⁴ each reflecting their respective academic backgrounds and training. For example, 'natural open space' is rather too similar to the term 'open space', which has a formal meaning as land laid out as a public garden, or used for the purposes of public recreation, or land which is a disused burial ground (Section 336, Town and Country Planning Act 1990). 'Urban greenspace' is a broad category which includes private gardens and private land, playing fields and recreation areas, agricultural land, allotments and cemeteries — only some of which support naturalistic landscapes. 'Wildspace' has a connotation of danger for some people and, like the term 'urban common', may not be widely understood by the public. 'Urban nature parks' and 'ecology parks' are only a fragmentary part of the natural resources of the urban area.

'Several studies have revealed how the urban green used and enjoyed by the residents differs from the green estate defined by professionals'

For this reason we prefer to use the term 'natural greenspace' to convey the richness and diversity in urban areas, which can range from small sites awaiting redevelopment and which have been colonised by spontaneous assemblages of plants and animals, to much larger areas which may be the legacy of earlier human endeavour, such as the substantial tracts of 'encapsulated countryside' found in most urban areas in Britain. We suggest that a working definition of accessible natural greenspace in urban areas is:

Land, water and geological features which have been naturally colonised by plants and animals and which are accessible on foot to large numbers of residents.

What really concerns us are those natural



Moseley Bog Local Nature Reserve, Birmingham (Photograph: P. Wakeley, English Nature)

greenspaces defined by the people who experience them. Several studies have revealed how the urban green used and enjoyed by residents differs from the green estate defined by professionals.

A study of people's environmental experiences in urban areas by Millward and Mostyn⁵ reveals how important 'left-over' pockets of land are for children's play and how natural areas are important for socialising among young people and adults alike. Often colonised by the spontaneous assemblages of plants which are described by Gilbert,⁶ these areas are seldom included in official open space inventories. Likewise, a survey of residents in the borough of Greenwich, a borough with one of the largest open space resources in London, revealed that incidental land — often patches of land without a name — were used just as frequently as well-known public open spaces.⁴ Close to the home, and often wild in character, these areas formed an unacknowledged but well used part of the open space resource.

In areas which lack open spaces, such environments make a substantial contribution to the recreational resources of urban areas. Protecting such plots from development, however, is likely to prove difficult unless they are incorporated into open space inventories and are identified as such in development plans. *Open Space Planning in London*, a recent study completed by environmental consultants for the London Planning Advisory Committee, reveals that in an inner city borough such as Camden, incidental open spaces in housing areas contribute a further 10% to the official open space resource. Not all of this incidental land has a natural

character, but with careful design and maintenance even quite small plots can achieve a sense of wildness and naturalness. For example, Growth Unlimited — the Camden Groundwork Trust — has created a wild flower meadow with the help of local residents in the middle of a high-density housing estate in St Pancras.

Access to natural greenspace

In an attempt to give recognition to the enormous appeal of wild areas as informal recreation areas, the presence of accessible natural greenspace close to where people live is often incorporated as a criterion for evaluating the nature conservation value of sites in urban areas. A number of nature conservation strategies have recognised the concept of areas which are deficient in wildlife habitats to which the public have reasonable access.

For example, one of the main aims of the nature conservation strategy produced in 1984 by the West Midlands County Council for the metropolitan county of the West Midlands was to ensure that all residents had reasonable access to wildlife habitats. The strategy identified 'urban deserts', based on areas where residents were more than 1 kilometre away from accessible wildlife habitats; habitat creation was seen as being very important in these areas, which were called 'wildlife action areas'. A similar methodology, using a distance of 1 kilometre, has been used in other nature conservation strategies — e.g. 'areas of deficiency' in London, used by the Greater London Council in 1985; 'areas of nature deprivation' in the Black Country, used by the Urban Wildlife Trust in 1990; and 'areas lacking in natural habitats' in Bristol and its environs, used by the Nature Conservancy Council in 1991.

There is little agreement, however, about the maximum distance people should have to walk to find a site open to the public.⁷ Distances range from 250-300 metres to a 10 minute walk according to Barker and Graf.² The home range for children aged 6 to 10 years in one North American study was a 5 minute walk, with a larger distance for those allowed to cycle freely.⁸

We recognise that such 'distance rules' are, by necessity, general and do not allow for cases where a natural greenspace on the other side of a busy main road could as well be a mile away for a young child. Although there are no hard and fast 'distance rules', nature conservation classifications which use the distance from wildlife habitats as one of the criteria give explicit recognition to the requirement for public access to sites of nature conservation importance. In this way, they begin to address the greenspace policy challenge we identify while approaches pursued by recreational professionals do not. For example, access to naturalistic areas for children's play was not a requirement

acknowledged in the open space hierarchy employed in London.⁹

Public access to natural greenspace brings with it a legal and a moral responsibility to manage sites in ways which enhance the recreational experience for people and to ensure the maintenance of high-quality habitats for wildlife. There is another side, however, to the opportunities offered by natural landscapes. Any area of open space can be perceived as dangerous by some people, and such perceived dangers do have real consequences for how people react to naturalistic greenspaces. However, these subjective impressions should not be used as arguments to banish wild and natural landscapes from urban areas. Rather, much as Spirm suggests,¹⁰ such concerns should be acknowledged and taken into account in the design and management of new and existing natural greenspaces.

Policies are urgently needed which relate public access to a given site with the maintenance of certain standards of nature conservation value. There are good reasons for believing that naturalistic sites can be effectively managed for both people and wildlife — for instance, the emergence of a new breed of leisure and amenity land managers who are more sensitive to, and better able to deliver, the recreational experiences and natural environments required by the public, together with the presence in urban areas of a number of environmental trusts staffed by landscape and community professionals working together.

Despite the fine examples given by Emery¹¹ and Johnston,¹² there are still too few examples which demonstrate best practice in the management of greenspace for people and wildlife. Too many public parks have never incorporated naturalistic landscapes to complement the formal areas. Too many urban nature parks are not sufficiently inviting to the general public, despite examples such as Camley Street Natural Park in London and Plant's Brook in Birmingham. Local Nature Reserves in urban areas have an important role to play in providing the much needed standards of good practice to demonstrate how both public access and the maintenance of nature conservation value can be achieved.

Local Nature Reserves

Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) are an under-used statutory designation. They can be established by local authorities on land in which they have an interest either through ownership, lease or agreement (Sections 16 and 21, National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949). LNRs are predominantly biological, but there are a number of fine geological sites. Linear sites, such as canals and abandoned railway lines, make good LNRs as they form links between wildlife habitats isolated by urban development as well as being places where people like to walk.

The purpose of the designation is to safeguard sites for both nature conservation and public enjoyment.¹³ Indeed the forerunner of the 1949 Act was the excellent report entitled *The Conservation of Nature in England and Wales* (Command 7122, 1947). This states that local authorities should establish local nature reserves 'with the object of providing for the conservation of nature and the enjoyment and education of the public'.

Local Nature Reserves can be chosen to reflect local priorities as opposed to the national priorities reflected in the selection of National Nature Reserves. Indeed, local authorities can hold the view that an LNR should be established because the natural features of a site are of special interest 'by virtue of the use to which the public puts them for quiet enjoyment and appreciation of nature'.¹⁴ On other occasions, the natural features of a site are of special interest for educational reasons. Of relevance to the present discussion is the role such sites play in demonstrating how public access and informal recreational use can be reconciled with the maintenance of a certain standard of nature conservation value.

The number of Local Nature Reserves in England has shown a sharp increase in recent

years¹³ and the total of 176 LNRs in England in March 1990 has now increased to 337, covering 13,977 hectares (March 1993). This rapid increase is due to the need to safeguard sites which are important to local communities. They are a response by local authorities to public pressure for accessible open spaces which contain interesting wildlife habitats. The majority (71%) of LNRs declared in 1992/3 are in urban or urban fringe areas. The relationship between the population of a sample of urban local authority areas and the provision of LNRs (see the table, right) shows a wide variation between less than 1,000 people per hectare of LNR (e.g. Canterbury and Wakefield) to more than 100,000 people per hectare (e.g. Camden and Leicester). Our argument is that Local Nature Reserves would serve as benchmarks of quality in relation to the provision and management of natural greenspace open to the public.

Experience with urban sites, such as that described by Roberts in the Lee Valley¹⁵ and Smyth in the Blackbrook Valley,¹⁶ illustrates how large numbers of visitors and use by local communities can be integrated with the maintenance of high-quality landscapes and features of nature conservation importance. Likewise, Camley Street Natural Park in

Sample of urban local authority areas showing the range of provision of LNRs in terms of area and population

People per hectare of Local Nature Reserve	Population ¹	Area of LNR ²	Population per hectare
Less than 1,000			
Canterbury	127,100	143	889
Wakefield	306,300	313	979
Between 1,000 and 5,000			
Portsmouth	174,700	119	1,468
Leeds	674,400	416	1,621
Dudley	300,400	181.7	1,653
Plymouth	238,800	105	2,274
Norwich	120,700	52.5	2,299
Peterborough	148,800	51.4	2,895
Stoke-on-Trent	244,800	82	2,985
Between 5,000 and 10,000			
Haringey	187,300	36.2	5,174
Coventry	292,500	48	6,094
Southwark	196,500	29.9	6,572
Hereford	49,800	6.1	8,164
Sandwell	282,000	30.3	9,307
Between 10,000 and 50,000			
Southampton	194,400	14	13,886
Liverpool	448,300	21	21,348
Gloucester	91,800	4.3	21,349
Derby	214,000	9.3	23,011
Birmingham	934,900	39.5	23,668
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	263,000	8	32,875
Oxford	109,000	2.2	49,545
Between 50,000 and 100,000			
Barnet	283,000	4.9	57,755
Islington	155,200	2.5	62,080
Greater than 100,000			
Leicester	270,600	2	135,300
Camden	170,500	1	170,500

1 Population data from preliminary 1991 Census figures (*Whitaker's Almanack*, 1993)

2 Local Nature Reserve data for April 1993



Children playing in Telford Town Park Local Nature Reserve (Photograph: John Box)

King's Cross, now a Local Nature Reserve, illustrates how an educational reserve created on a former coal storage area can achieve a high standard of naturalistic wildlife habitat and one which is attractive to local residents. Using these successful experiences as guides to the practical management of accessible natural landscapes, the new breed of 'amenity' landscape managers should have the confidence and skills to introduce naturalistic landscapes into established open spaces and to manage existing natural greenspace, safe in the knowledge that both people and wildlife will benefit from their initiatives.

Minimum targets for accessible urban natural greenspace

The requirement to discuss minimum targets for the provision of accessible natural greenspace in urban areas arises from changing public attitudes to natural greenspace, as well as from the changing context in which strategic and local plans are now being prepared. One consequence of the Rio Summit in 1992 and Agenda 21 is that local sustainable development plans will need to be prepared in the near future. The need to reconcile land use planning with the overarching requirement of sustainable development has a direct bearing on greenspace policies.

The message of sustainable development is that it is possible to achieve development without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The key to achieving sustainability is to leave future generations an inheritance of knowledge, technology, capital and environmental assets which is no less than that inherited by the current generation.¹⁷ It will be necessary to ensure that biological capital, as indicated by the biodiversity of areas and habitats, is not diminished. This long-term accounting system is needed to deal with the problem that each generation may be impoverished in its lifetime but the next one will only know what it finds and will not be able to fully comprehend past losses.

'Without a commitment to minimum targets, it is likely that policies for sustainable cities will lead to the loss of natural greenspaces rather than their conservation'

Proposals for sustainable cities in Europe, such as the Commission of the European Communities' *Green Paper on the Urban Environment*, have already raised the prospect of compact city forms. Undoubtedly the implied process of urban 'densification' which such suggestions raise will mean that urban greenspace will be subjected to renewed development pressures. The consequences for natural greenspace are clear because the cumulative experience of urban ecologists is that the biological capital and biodiversity of urban habitats is very sensitive to raising building densities. Without a commitment to maintaining and achieving minimum targets of accessible natural greenspace in urban areas, it is likely that policies for sustainable cities will lead to the loss of natural greenspaces rather than their conservation.

A background paper on local government and sustainable development prepared for the Rio Summit demonstrates the crucial role that local authorities must play in the sustainability of local environments.¹⁸ The authors argue that 'Government at appropriate levels should... ensure that adequate green space is provided in urban areas to improve ecological and landscape balances'.

Critical to the debate raised by sustainable cities is the question of how the value of natural greenspace is expressed in planning policies. If the contribution urban greenspaces

make to future generations is solely in terms of their contribution to the stock of environmental assets, then urban environmental assets will always be deemed to be poor substitutes for their rural counterparts. On the other hand, if urban greenspace policies acknowledge the social and educational assets of accessible natural greenspace, then the inheritance value of these areas is seen to be unrivalled. Their proximity to large sections of the population allows accessible natural greenspace in urban areas to be an extremely valuable part of our children's inheritance. In our view, that is why the question of standards for the quality, as well as the quantity, of accessible natural greenspace in urban areas cannot be allowed to rest.

In addressing the question of minimum targets for natural landscapes, we have not attempted to enter the detailed scientific debate which has taken place among professional ecologists about the minimum size for a nature reserve. Our intention is to emphasise that evidence from social surveys is likely to prove more compelling when it comes to providing justification for our case.¹⁹ Building on the evidence of social surveys mentioned above and the experience of urban ecologists such as Gilbert,⁶ nature conservation professionals such as Barker and Graf,² and recreational planners like Duffield and Walker,⁷ we offer the following as minimum targets for accessible natural greenspace in urban areas:

- An urban resident should be able to enter a natural greenspace of at least 2 hectares within 0.5 kilometres of their home.
- Provision should be made for Local Nature Reserves in every urban area at the minimum level of 1 hectare per thousand population (this is equivalent to 10 square metres for each resident).

In addition to these targets, we suggest guidelines for natural open space provision: at least one 20 hectare site within 2 kilometres of all residents; at least one 100 hectare site within 5 kilometres of all residents; and at least one 500 hectare site within 10 kilometres of all residents.

Several publications provide practical ways for working towards these targets — e.g. Emery,¹¹ Johnston,¹² and the *Councils for Wildlife Guide*.²⁰ Our intention here is to provoke debate about securing a minimum place for accessible natural greenspace in urban areas — before it is too late.

Notes

- 1 S. Kidd: 'The green space policy challenge'. *Town & Country Planning*, 1992, 61, May, pp. 145-146
- 2 G. Barker and A. Graf: 'Principles for nature conservation in towns and cities'. *Urban Wildlife Now*, No. 3, Nature Conservancy Council, 1989
- 3 See, for example, *Planning for Wildlife in Metropolitan Areas*. Nature Conservancy Council, 1987; and *Countryside and Nature Conservation Issues in District*

Step Outside

More than a chateau

Blois, France



BRIAN GOODEY

For Blois, the 'fun town' presentation of towns which will survive through tourism is clearly inadequate. Like Bath or Stratford, Blois has been at the game too long: here nothing in the old town is brash; all is sedate — a maiden aunt requiring a correct visit.

On a recent visit, I spent much of my time in a restored Halle aux Grains, a Corn Exchange, carefully inflated to modern conference centre use. I was here for a pioneer Anglo-French generated meeting on European landscapes, which too often degenerated into skirmishes between the professional and ministerial guerilla forces of our French hosts. As points were scored, it seemed all the more essential to visit the townscape which had attracted this meeting. All the more important as the Mayor and French Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, seemed determined to bring the premier French landscape school from its established base at Versailles to Blois, as a questionable example of the latest round of French decentralisation.

Grey, misty days — the obverse of Turner's magically lit 1830 coining of the view from the Loire which highlights the enduring morphology of the town. It was time to walk the peculiarly satisfying qualities which cause most visitors to sink into the old town streets and stalk, unlaboured, up the grand steps to the chateau ... and to its hilltop counterpart, the cathedral across town.

Historically, it is the symmetry of church and state, rampart and garden settings, and the quiet dominance that squeezes the town together, with cranked medieval streets, squares and slopes making each new turn a pleasure.

This is beginning to sound as wet as a Pampers interior, and I had better come clean and confirm that it is the past century of town management — punctuated by 1940s bombing — which has brought the town comfortably to date.

It's not a forced history which inspires, but rather the clever and careful junctions, the hidden parking lots, and the illusion that the pedestrian owns the place. The price is paid in a peripheral, white-blocked, suburban scatter ... an auto-domain.

For over a century the town's streets have

attracted up-market boutiques and windows worth a gaze, as well as a sequence of hotels and public buildings, and a plethora of recent restaurants which emphasise a visit of quality (and therefore expense).

But for over a century (or so the mature feature trees suggest) small parks have served to divert traffic and ensure that walking is a pleasure — from a railway station which still

reads as though it contributes to the town, to a set-piece tree-lined street, to the Square Victor Hugo where a small fountained pond and striking trio of trees hide the nearby traffic and provide a key setting for the integration of chateau and town. Down to the tree-full (no French timber castration here) Place Louis XII and the chateau steps. The pedestrian scheme has low-key corner turns, where semi-circular seats and modest trees soften the angles.

Blois is promoted as 'Ville D'Art et D'Histoire'. The chateau was a royal residence and offers a text on French architecture from the 13th to the 17th centuries, but you can enjoy it without feeling the burden of learning.

Somehow I missed the statue to Denis Papin, inventor of the pressure cooker, but chanced upon two first-floor plaques which note:

LAN 1845 DANS CETTE MAISON
AUGUSTE POULAIN 1825-1918
FABRIQUA SES PREMIERS
CHOCOLATS

and

ICI NAQUIT ROBERT-HOUDIN
PRESTIDIGITEUR 7 DECEMBRE
1805

Probe further and both these hints come to life. The Chocolaterie Poulin is still going strong, with free visitor samples, on the edge of the old town. Houdin has been granted a whole room in the chateau, illustrating not only his conjuring, but also his contribution as a clock maker and scientist.

There's as much to pick up from the street-scape hints as from the formal exhibitions. Blois is still growing, and its historical messages are expanding beyond the packaged hints of Loire valley guidebooks.

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- Local Plans. Nature Conservancy Council/Countryside Commission, 1990
- 4 J. Burgess, C. M. Harrison and M. Limb: 'People, parks and the urban green: a study of popular meanings and values for open spaces in the city'. *Urban Studies*, 1988, 25, pp. 455-473
 - 5 A. Millward and B. Mostyn: 'People and nature in cities: the social aspects of planning and managing natural parks in urban areas'. *Urban Wildlife Now*, No. 2, Nature Conservancy Council, 1988
 - 6 O. L. Gilbert: *The Ecology of Urban Habitats*. Chapman & Hall, 1989
 - 7 B. Duffield and S. Walker: *Urban Parks and Open Spaces — A Review*. Sports Council/Social Sciences Research Council, 1983
 - 8 L. Schicker: 'Design criteria for children and wildlife in residential development'. In L. W. Adams and D. L. Leedy (Eds): *Integrating Man and Nature in the Metropolitan Environment*. National Institute for Urban Wildlife, Columbia, MD, USA, 1987, pp. 99-105
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 - 12 J. Johnston: *Nature Areas for City People*. Ecology Handbook 14, London Ecology Unit, 1990
 - 13 J. D. Box: 'Local Nature Reserves: nature conservation and public enjoyment'. *The Planner*, 1991, 77, (25), pp. 5-7
 - 14 *Local Nature Reserves in England*. English Nature, 1991, p.3
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 - 19 C. M. Harrison: 'Nature conservation, science and popular values'. In F. B. Goldsmith and A. Warren (Eds): *Conservation in Progress*. Wiley, 1993, pp. 35-49
 - 20 *Councils for Wildlife Guide*. British Association of Nature Conservationists (BANC), Newbury, 1990

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