

Global to Local Perspectives on the Role and Growing Importance of Urban Protected Areas

Kyra Bohnett

I ATTENDED THE PANEL DISCUSSION ABOUT NATURE WITHIN METROPOLITAN REGIONS titled “From wilderness to city edge: the role of urban protected areas in metropolitan regions and protected area systems.” Six speakers talked about the importance of nature within city planning at different scales from global to regional, and at different levels of “wilderness.” The panel encompassed a global perspective on urban protected areas. Ted Trzyna discussed the bigger picture of how urban sprawl threatens natural areas by means of fire, air and water pollution, invasive species, and domestic animals in regions throughout the globe. Then Mike Watson gave a presentation regarding the political and personal relevance of “near wilderness.” He touched upon how humans define and feel towards wilderness throughout history, and broke down the concept of “wilderness,” as we tend to see it as a separate entity from our human environment. He pointed out that nature sparks fierce emotions within people such as fear, love, and passion. Some, however, can disconnect and see nature to be useful resources. Generally, though, humans share a collective belief that wilderness is important to our well-being.

Lynn Wilson spoke about regionally about decision-making concerning nature conservation in North America. The four main attributes she listed as important for expanding urban areas were: “presence of vision, political commitment, organizational capacity, and consensus-building.” Then she spoke of the “collective impact model” consisting of a common agenda, shared measurement, mutual reinforcement, communication and backbone support. Laying out these strategies was useful in seeing how projects and plans actually operate at large levels organizationally.

Annie Burke brought previous points to a local scale by giving information on protected spaces of the Bay Area, its changing demographics and the need to connect people with each other and nature. She spoke about the diversity within the Bay Area’s protected areas and how land is managed among conflicting interests. Moving on, Jeff Ward spoke on planning regionally for a system of parks and protected areas in British Columbia, similarly to Annie Burke in the Bay Area. Robert Doyle then took an environmental justice perspective centralized around the Bay Area and using land to connect less privileged people to parks in a way that is relevant. His examples included public outreach and youth engagement in the urban East Bay of California, an urban

Citation: Weber, Samantha, ed. 2016. *Engagement, Education, and Expectations—The Future of Parks and Protected Areas: Proceedings of the 2015 George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites*.

Hancock, Michigan: George Wright Society.

© 2016 George Wright Society. All rights reserved. Please direct all permission requests to info@georgewright.org.

shoreline restoration program which hires inner city kids to plant seeds, garden, and connect to a place. He spoke about a model program connecting hospitals and protected areas taking children with illness out into nature with a medical doctor and naturalist and simply implementing natural themes within hospitals.

The panel brought up all sorts of current organizations, as well as projections for change in the future, in terms city population and how we can live more harmoniously among nature. The universal theme was to connect people, all types of people, to nature in a variety of different ways to benefit both the human community as well as the ecosystems we live amongst.

Reflection

As a San Francisco State geography student, I am always looking for connections between humans and place, and I understand the importance of that relationship to the wellbeing of the Earth and its population. What I found the most fascinating aspect was changing demographics of cities and park-goers. This seems to be a crucial subject matter as we face a new set of challenges in the human race brought on by the combination of global climate change and population growth. I believe that it is vital, beyond any barriers of ethnicity, sexuality, age, or class to be able to work with each other and with nature cooperatively, compassionately and creatively as communities grow. We will need to operate on such values in order to tackle the challenges we face as a species in such a pivotal time in our history. In my own career, I know I would like to bridge the gaps between humans and each other and nature. Hence, this panel was incredibly useful for seeing the nature of the projects currently in operation and how to implement future plans for connecting city populations with the wild natural world.