



Connecting People, Nature, and Culture through Metropolitan Conservation Alliances

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This is about three powerful ideas and how they can be brought together in synergetic ways. The first of these is a movement to encourage urban people to get out into nature. The second is metropolitan conservation alliances. The third is a renewed effort to integrate the protection and interpretation of cultural heritage and natural heritage.

Getting urban people out into nature near where they live

The first powerful idea is that people need nature: Direct exposure to nature is critical for healthy childhood development and the physical and mental health and wellbeing of both children and adults. This is backed up by a solid body of scientific evidence, which Richard Louv drew upon for his influential 2008 book, *Last Child in the Woods*,² and it is the basis for the Healthy Parks Healthy People movement, which started in Parks Victoria in Australia and has influenced many other conservation agencies, including the United States National Park Service.

Health benefits are only one side of the coin, however, and the one that gets a lot of attention. The other side of the coin is political: Nature conservation locally and globally depends on urban voters, donors, and communicators. Urban people are more likely to support conservation everywhere when they appreciate nature where they live. In a fast-urbanizing world, nature is being squeezed and people are losing contact with it. Spending a lot of time on digital screens doesn't help.

Metropolitan conservation alliances

The second powerful idea is metropolitan conservation alliances, which promote cooperation among organizations that work to conserve their region's natural assets and educate people about them. The best-known of these alliances, which has served as a model for others, is Chicago Wilderness, a coalition of some 200 organizations that grew out of efforts that started

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in the 1960s and was officially launched in 1996. Its region covers part of four states—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin—which has more than 10 million people and over 545,000 acres (220,000 hectares) of protected areas.

Chicago Wilderness is broad-based. Its members include national, state, and local government conservation agencies, municipal and county governments, conservation and natural history associations, zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens, universities, and private companies.

It is also broadly focused. Currently, its emphasis is on oak ecosystems (oaks are keystone species in the region), a dozen other “priority species,” water as a resource, applying technology and data to accelerate collaboration, working with landowners to undertake conservation actions, and “Beyond the Choir.” The latter has to do with “actively engaging the cultural, generational, economic, and geographic diversity of our region . . . We reach beyond the choir to create and sustain a strong conservation constituency.”³ There is also a cross-cutting theme on climate change.

Other metropolitan conservation alliances in the United States have similar membership profiles, but often with somewhat different purposes and activities. In other countries, metropolitan conservation alliances tend to have narrower structures or purposes.

What I found missing

Before I get to the cultural side of the nature-culture equation, I want to relate what I found when I went to cities in different parts of the world and visited organizations responsible for protecting and interpreting nature.

As the project leader and author of an IUCN publication, *Urban Protected Areas* (2014),⁴ I visited museums, zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens, science centers, museums of regions and cities, and protected areas in several U.S. cities, as well as London, Paris, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Sydney, and Melbourne. I was struck by a general lack of systematic cooperation among these organizations. I was also struck by the failure of most museums and similar institutions to show visitors where to go to experience nature where they live, a lack of exhibits about local nature, and the failure in many such institutions to sell books on nature in their regions. Let me describe these one by one.

Museums should encourage their visitors to go to local natural areas to experience the “real thing.” This is where almost all the institutions visited fail, although little cost need be involved. Once visitors become interested in what they have seen in a museum, garden, or zoo, they could be directed to natural areas close to where they live to see the “real thing.”

There are fine exceptions. For example, an initiative in Chicago could easily be replicated widely. On summer weekends, rangers from nearby Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore are posted at the entrance to the Field Museum of Natural History to show visitors what they will find at the Lakeshore, as well as in natural areas close to their homes.

More and better exhibits about local and regional nature are needed. Exhibits often focus on the exotic, giving visitors the impression that nature is someplace else. Also, most zoos and many botanic gardens are organized by kinds of animals and plants, rather than by habitat, biome, region, or country. In some cases, there is virtually nothing focused on the natural environment of the region.

There are good examples of what can be done. For instance, the Oakland Zoo is building a California Trail, which will focus on the state's natural environments and hold living exhibits of large mammals and birds found in the state. The American Museum of Natural History in New York City has a Hall of New York State Environments focusing on Stissing Mountain and the farming village of Pine Plains, 90 miles (145 km) from the city.

Museums should sell books about nature in their city and region. Selling books in museum stores may seem a minor thing, but if even a very small fraction of the visitors to a major museum are interested in natural history guides and other books about nature in their localities, they are certain to include people whose lives will be changed by reading and using those books. Digital media supplement print publications and may replace some of them, but there is no digital substitute for holding a beautifully illustrated guide to local birds or trees.

Unfortunately, few stores at natural history museums or similar institutions sell more than a token selection, if that, of books about local and regional nature, even when many such titles are in print. Good examples can be found of what can be done, but they are few and far between.

The movement to bring nature and culture together

The third powerful idea is integrating natural and cultural heritage. In the conservation field, this has a long history in efforts to understand and protect cultural landscapes, that is, landscapes that have been influenced or shaped by human involvement.

World Heritage. The World Heritage Convention, adopted in 1972, provides for designation of cultural, natural, and mixed World Heritage Sites. Although both nature and culture fall under this single international instrument, they have usually been treated separately, with the exception of mixed sites, as well as cultural landscapes, which were recognized for inclusion in the World Heritage List in 1992. (As of now, there are 814 cultural, 207 natural, and 35 mixed sites inscribed, of which 88 are cultural landscapes.)

In recent years, there has been growing interest in bridging this divide, both in conceptual and management terms. Kishore Rao, then Director of the World Heritage Center, wrote in 2015 that “the immediate impact of a cultural site on visitors hinges upon the way it fits into its natural setting. This goes hand in hand with the realization that natural sites are frequently marked by longstanding cultural connections and biocultural heritage.”⁵

The three official Advisory Bodies named in the World Heritage Convention are working with UNESCO to mesh nature and culture in the World Heritage System. These are IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature), ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), and ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property).

More specifically, IUCN and ICOMOS are leading on connecting practice, IUCN and ICCROM are responsible for a World Heritage leadership development program integrating nature and culture, and IUCN and ICOMOS are featuring nature-culture integration at their respective major conferences.

United States National Park Service. A similar movement has been taking place in the U.S. National Park Service (USNPS). In 2012, at the request of then Director Jonathan Jarvis, the

Science Committee of the USNPS Advisory Board reviewed the goals and policies of resource management in the USNPS. The Committee's report noted that since the last such broad policy review in the 1960s, additions to the System have included "significant cultural, recreational, and urban resources. The cultural values and interests held by the American people have greatly broadened, generating pressing demands for diversity in the National Park Service and for relevancy of the National Park System to new generations of citizens."

The report pointed out that, "Many if not most parks include both natural and cultural resources, and many park resources feature natural and cultural attributes — Yellowstone bison are both ecologically important and culturally significant. Parks exist as coupled natural-human systems. Natural and cultural resource management must occur simultaneously and, in general, interdependently.... Artificial division of the National Park System into 'natural parks' and 'cultural parks' is ineffective and a detriment to successful resource management."⁶

Late in 2016, in response to the Advisory Board's recommendations and further consultations, Jarvis issued Director's Order 100, "Resource Stewardship for the 21st Century."⁷ Section 4 of the Order sets out policies for integrating natural and resource stewardship, including creating incentives for funding projects that integrate nature and culture; requiring nature-culture integration in stewardship strategies; and collocating natural and cultural resource operations where possible.

Metropolitan alliances. In metropolitan conservation alliances, the movement to bring nature and culture together hasn't yet penetrated very far, even though some of their key partners are agencies such as the U.S. National Park Service that have given priority to integrating nature and culture.

In some cities, metropolitan conservation alliances have counterparts in metropolitan *cultural* alliances, at least in the United States. These tend to concentrate on the visual and performance arts and sometimes literature, but rarely include history or other cultural heritage.

Natural Neighbors

These findings led to our launching the Natural Neighbors initiative, which aims to introduce greatly increased numbers of people to the natural and cultural heritage of the regions where they live. It does this by promoting alliances within metropolitan areas among conservation and historic preservation agencies on one hand, and museums and similar organizations on the other.

Natural Neighbors is a concept as much as an initiative. There is no template; it is not a kind of franchise operation.

Originally, the rationale behind Natural Neighbors focused on nature. But to those of us who were organizing a pilot Natural Neighbors project in Los Angeles, it soon became clear that urban people are more likely to have a sense of belonging and of civic responsibility when they appreciate their region's history and culture, as well as its natural environment.

Although Natural Neighbors is still evolving as a concept and in practice, its rationale remains the same: In most metropolitan areas, several kinds of institutions, along with agencies responsible for nature conservation and cultural heritage, work to interpret and sensitize people to nature and human history, but systematic cooperation among them is uncommon.

Natural Neighbors encourages museums of natural history and history and similar institutions (these include zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens, science centers, museums of cities and regions, and so forth) to do the following:

- Create more and better exhibits about local and regional nature and history.
- Direct visitors to natural areas and historic sites nearby.
- Carry a good selection of guides to local and regional natural and human history.

Natural Neighbors encourages conservation areas and historic sites to do the following:

- Direct visitors to nearby museums and similar institutions where they can learn about what they have experienced.

Natural Neighbors encourages all such organizations to do the following:

- Cooperate in engaging with the underserved.
- Have exhibits and activities linking nature, history, literature, and the arts.
- Cooperate with schools and universities.
- Include exhibits and activities about nature conservation, historic preservation, climate change, and benefits of outdoor exercise and contact with nature.

In Los Angeles, 20 agencies and institutions have agreed to participate in Natural Neighbors Southern California. Themes under discussion include engaging with underserved local communities, and increasing public awareness of the region's distinctive Mediterranean-type ecosystem.

In addition to its involvement in the Los Angeles project, the U.S. National Park Service has proposed using the Natural Neighbors concept in several other U.S. cities that have national parks or are near them.⁸

Going deeper

I've outlined the rationale for metropolitan alliances that bring together people, nature, and culture, discussed basic structures and functions, and given a few examples. There is much more to consider. Here are a few things being discussed in informal networks that have started to form around them, as well as in forums such as IUCN and the George Wright Society:

- Defining culture in ways that include contemporary and intangible culture, as well as historic and prehistoric sites.
- Recognizing that different people and social groups have different perspectives on history, usually for very good reasons.
- Finding ways of welcoming people who are uncomfortable entering natural places and museums where they don't see people like themselves.
- Finding local symbols that capture the public imagination, such as an animal or plant species or an historic trail.
- Being flexible about the "catchment areas" of conservation alliances, considering other kinds of regions, as well as metropolitan areas.
- Finding ways of focusing on the local and regional without distracting attention from the global, and drawing attention to the interconnections.
- Drawing on social thought, social and behavioral science, and concepts from the design professions, including, for instance, spirit of place, sense of belonging, and the regionalist ideas of Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford.
- Realizing that lateral thinkers are important.

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Endnotes

1. Ted Trzyna: President, InterEnvironment Institute; Chair, IUCN WCPA Urban Conservation Strategies Specialist Group; Chair, Natural Neighbors. www.Trzyna.info. I appreciate comments from Tim Badman, Stacie Beute, Mark Bouman, and David Goldstein on a draft, but they bear no responsibility for the result.
2. Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005.)
3. Chicago Wilderness, “Beyond the Choir,” <http://www.chicagowilderness.org/?page=our-worknew>.
4. Ted Trzyna, *Urban Protected Areas: Profiles and Best Practice Guidelines*, Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 22. (Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, 2014).
5. Kishore Rao, editorial, “Culture-Nature Links,” *World Heritage* 75 (April 2015), 1, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/review/75/>.
6. Rita Colwell, Susan Avery, Joel Berger, Gary E. Davis, Healy Hamilton, Thomas Lovejoy, Shirley Malcom, Ann McMullen, Michael Novacek, Richard J. Roberts, Richard Tapia, and Gary Machlis, “Revisiting Leopold: Resource Stewardship in the National Parks,” *Parks* 20.2 (2014): 15–24, <http://doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.CH.2014.PARKS-20-2.DRC.en>.
7. USNPS Director’s Order 100, 20 December 2016, “Resource Stewardship for the 21st Century,” www.nps.gov/policy/DOrders/DO_100.htm.
8. For background and details, visit www.NaturalNeighbors.org.