

Small Scale Urban Nature Parks: Why Should We Care?

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Small scale urban natural parks have the potential to contribute to the health and wellbeing of urban communities. Although recreation researchers have seldom focused on such areas, recreation research theory can be successfully applied to urban natural parks, especially if augmented by application of social capital and social networks theory. Social capital and networks theories will aid recreation researchers and policy makers in understanding the processes and benefits associated with urban green space. This understanding may be important relative to low income urban community members who may not participate regularly in nature-based recreation.

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Outdoor recreation researchers traditionally have focused principally on recreation in wilderness settings. Early work in our field coincided with a growing environmental movement and corresponding increased public interest in spectacular and remote sites like Yosemite or Yellowstone. Recreation issues at distant locations are important to research. However, this focus on isolated wilderness recreation has led most researchers to overlook the individual and community benefits derived from nature-based recreation sites found in more easily accessible areas located within or close to populated urban centers.

Little is known currently about the recreation concerns, preferences, expectations, or complications faced by users of small scale urban natural parks. Small scale urban nature parks provide convenient recreation opportunities for city dwellers who may otherwise have limited or no access to nature-based recreation. In this essay, we discuss three related topics concerning urban nature-based recreation. First, we suggest that small scale natural parks located in highly urbanized areas offer convenient and attractive opportunities to enjoy the benefits of nature-based recreation for residents. Consequently, to ensure that recreation researchers are adequately considering the full spectrum of nature-based activities, urban nature areas deserve greater attention. Second, community parks have the capacity to contribute not only to the physical and mental well-being of urban dwellers, but have the capacity to contribute to social capital generation leading to a broader contribution to overall community well-being. We propose that recreation researchers have much to gain by incorporating social capital and social networks theories into the field in general, and especially in connection with accessible neighborhood nature areas. These first discussion points are general in character, and refer broadly to urban areas and city residents. To provide a more grounded example of the first two points, our third

discussion topic will focus on a specific group of urban residents who may gain considerably from convenient neighborhood nature areas. We suggest that urban parks play a significant role in the recreation choices and well-being of urban residents living in lower income inner city neighborhoods.

A thorough discussion of any one of these topics could be voluminous. We recognize that our essay merely scratches the surface. Nevertheless, our intention is to highlight the important role urban nature-based recreation sites can play in individual and community well-being, and the need for further research on the connections between natural parks and community health. As urban populations grow, and landscapes in and around metropolitan areas undergo accelerated concomitant changes, neighborhood natural parks may become likely options for urban populations in search of accessible nature-based recreation opportunities. Much research is needed to document the contribution urban parks make to neighborhood welfare.

A neighborhood natural park can refer to any undeveloped or often reclaimed area in an urban metropolis. These parks may be situated on less than an acre of land or cover ten or more acres. *Natural parks* does not refer to the grass covered fields and basketball courts commonly associated with city parks, but rather areas in which native flora and fauna are purposefully cultivated and deliberately few developed amenities are available. Natural parks exist with the specific intention of promoting more contact with, and appreciation for, nature. These parks are often reclaimed industrial sites (i.e., brownfields) or abandoned municipal lots that have fallen into disrepair through lack of use. To begin a second life as a natural park, these sites typically must be cleaned and refurbished to promote native plant growth and animal activity. In other cases, large natural areas may have been set aside for preservation during a city's period of development and urbanization specifically with the intention to provide day hiking, picnicking,

or other nature-based activities for local residents and visitors. Of central importance to any site is their geographic location within or on the borders of highly urbanized cities such that they can provide easy access for residents who may be unable or unwilling to travel to distant nature areas.

Considering the time, expense, and planning involved for a camping or day trip to remote wilderness, expecting that many urban residents will choose a convenient day trip to an easily accessible local nature area is reasonable. A locally available nature park may be the only option for busy urban working professionals to enjoy the relative peace and quiet of a natural setting. Moreover, not everyone is willing or interested in camping, backpacking, or roughing it in the wilderness. Many vacationers and recreation seekers prefer Disneyland or room service to a tent in the woods. Although some urban dwellers might prefer their lengthier vacations in more developed accommodations, they appreciate the opportunity to take a peaceful walk in a natural area, and be able to return to the comforts of home only a short drive away. For people who live in congested urban areas, the value of an opportunity to do a nature walk, visit with friends, or enjoy a family cookout in a natural park should not be underestimated. It may be the only interaction with nature many urban dwellers can readily enjoy. Yet, little recreation research has focused on these smaller types of excursions to local nature areas. The benefits of time spent recreating in a nature setting are just as significant in a convenient local natural park, as in a remote wilderness.

Medical, psychological, and recreation researchers have suggested the restorative and stress reducing qualities of activities conducted in natural settings (Kaplan, 2001; Ulrich et al., 1991). The availability of local convenient recreation spaces often provides opportunities for healthy physical activities like walking, sports activities, and imaginative and active play for

children. Policy makers have noted the alarming rise in childhood obesity with its associated diseases including diabetes, and have suggested that this trend is correlated with poor diet and lack of exercise. Easily accessed neighborhood nature areas will provide urban residents, both children and adults, with the convenient opportunity for salubrious physical exercise. Nature parks can also promote psychological benefits. Time spent in nature appears to reduce stress and anxiety, and promote improved concentration. Neighborhood natural areas provide recreation experiences for urban residents, connections to nature in urban areas dominated by concrete and asphalt, and can help to promote community livability by strengthening ties among neighbors and park visitors.

A link seems to exist between availability of public leisure spaces, physical activities, social ties, and individual and community well-being. Natural parks can enhance the aesthetic qualities of neighborhoods (often resulting in higher property values), and provide attractive sites where neighbors may strengthen their bonds to each other. These stronger interpersonal bonds are the seeds of social cohesion and healthier communities. It may also be the case that higher levels of physical activity facilitated by neighborhood natural parks foster beneficial social factors such as civic participation, trust, and social relationships and interaction.

We suggest that to more fully account for the beneficial impacts neighborhood natural parks have on social connections, researchers should be including social capital and social networks theories in their work. Effectively researching urban nature areas may require the use of traditional recreation theories including conflict, place attachment, and crowding. However, recreation research that employs social networks and social capital theories could add a new dimension of understanding to how local natural parks contribute to neighborhood well-being, individual health, and community cohesiveness.

Analyzing social networks will help academics, planners, and decision-makers more fully understand how information is disseminated in communities, how individual recreation/leisure behaviors are affected by various social influences, and will create better outreach techniques. Social network research provides tools to investigate in greater detail how relationships are developing, or deteriorating, in neighborhood nature areas. These details are important to any consideration of community social capital and neighborhood improvement. The dynamics of the relationships that appear to be fostered in community open spaces need to be understood. Not only will networks research help explain the structures and processes of relations and information exchange in communities, but may assist recreation researchers with accounting for the differing beliefs, attitudes, and preferences for local nature-based recreation and leisure socialization in urban communities. Social networks theory can contribute to recreation research concerning the processes and variables that occur in relationship formation which, in turn, are central to community social capital generation. Social networks theory can improve an understanding of the dynamics of neighborly interaction in local green spaces that promotes greater neighborhood social cohesion. This step is important to more fully acknowledge the benefits including social capital growth that neighborhood urban nature areas have to offer.

Social capital theory strengthens established recreation theories by permitting researchers to see not only how time spent in natural settings benefits individuals, but how informal impromptu meetings in neighborhood open areas can promote social connections, trust, and reciprocity among neighborhood residents. Researchers using social capital theory can more effectively explore broader issues associated with leisure and recreation including the potential of local natural parks to promote a sense of connection among neighbors; factors associated with community attachment; neighborhood parks' improvement of a sense of neighborhood safety

and awareness of community issues; and the promotion of civic engagement with benefits that transcend a single recreation activity or event. By incorporating social capital and social networks theories, recreation researchers have the potential to contribute to an understanding of how local open spaces promote social cohesion among neighbors in any community, but particularly in communities facing difficult social and economic challenges. Understanding the links between available urban nature-based recreation areas, social capital, and physical activities may become even more important as new public health challenges arise, health care costs increase, and lifestyle changes occur.

A rise in sedentary leisure-time activities in the US seems to be occurring, as well as the related, increasing incidence of obesity, and illnesses associated with obesity such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease (National Institutes of Health, 1998). Research suggests that social capital associated with neighborhood environmental features such as availability of green space, may play an especially important role in combating obesity (Poortinga, 2006). Social capital seems to positively impact other health related concerns as well, including healthy child development, adolescent well-being, mental health, violent crime rates, mortality, susceptibility to binge drinking, depression, smoking cessation programs, and general well-being (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). If a link exists between community social capital and mortality rates, this suggests that public health programs could have a greater likelihood of success by focusing on community-level factors such as neighborliness (e.g., generated through face-to-face interactions), rather than solely on individual-level factors such as deviant behavior modification. Time spent in activities associated with open natural areas may be correlated with higher levels of social capital since such activities involve participation with others or periodic interaction with others in public spaces. The social capital and social networks paradigms, largely unused in

recreation research, seem to have significant potential for improving an understanding of urban natural parks. This understanding may prove crucial to aid research on the recreation needs and preferences of people living in low-income urban neighborhoods.

To help illustrate our discussion, we will consider an example of the specific usefulness of urban natural parks in low income inner city communities and how social capital and networks theories might pertain to these communities. Neighborhood green spaces can contribute to recreation opportunities for residents who may lack the time or ready access to remote nature-based recreation. Low income urban populations often contend with discouraging accessibility challenges that inhibit participation in nature-based recreation activities in distant national parks or forests (Searle & Jackson, 1985). If convenient access to recreation sites is typically associated with participation, then local natural parks may play a role in connecting low income urban communities to nature-based recreation and its many benefits.

The potential for physical activity, health improvements, and community social capital associated with public green space may be significant when considered in relation to low socio-economic inner city communities. Residents in low income neighborhoods, who are often disproportionately people of color, are more likely to report a lower overall sense of health and well-being than people living in wealthier communities (Subramanian, Kim, & Kawachi, 2002). Local natural parks and other nature areas in urban centers may improve the quality of life for low-income inner city residents. These benefits have yet to be fully understood or appreciated.

Incorporating social capital theory into recreation research concentrating on low income urban communities may be helpful. Recreation researchers can increase their relevance in urban community planning by combining social capital theory with traditional recreation theories to

better explain how local natural parks can contribute to recreation opportunities and quality of life for urban communities. For example, more qualitative research that employs social capital and networks theories could provide a richer description of quality of life and community livability issues attached to nature-based recreation opportunities. This type of research will help provide a more nuanced understanding of factors affecting recreation in urban communities including recreation socialization, activity norms, and networks of information and support resources. This research will allow scientists to more fully describe benefits such as increased community cohesion that neighborhood recreation in local natural parks can provide. These research tools can also help better account for the costs and problems associated with urban open spaces including crime opportunities that residents fear may accompany brush covered open spaces.

Accessibility to local natural parks will not single-handedly lessen the challenges faced by low income inner city residents. Nevertheless, public health research, research conducted on the benefits of time spent in nature, and research on communities and social capital all point to the considerably positive contribution that neighborhood natural parks can make (Coley, Kuo, & Sullivan, 1997; Ulrich et al., 1991). Small scale natural parks may not only provide the direct benefits of physical activity and connection to the natural world for low-income inner city residents who cannot easily visit distant wilderness sites, but they may also help improve neighborhood livability. Despite the growing awareness of the benefits of easily accessible nature-based recreation and the demographic imbalance of those participating in nature-based recreation, few agencies or organizations are providing significant funding for research concerning these areas. Well-meaning staff in agencies and organizations talk about the importance of livable neighborhoods and the desire to create more equitable access to nature

experiences, but a comparatively small amount of money and political energy seems to actually support this type of research. The most active agents in community improvement through green spaces are small local community-based organizations, often reclaiming an abandoned city lot for a community garden. Some agencies and non-profits are making efforts at supporting research and providing small natural parks for urban residents in general, and low income communities in particular. Nevertheless, minimal support exists for researching urban natural parks despite the fact that such parks appear to have the potential to provide payoffs in the long run for a relatively modest up-front cost in terms of research and development.

Researchers and policy makers, however, must be cautious about expectations for neighborhood green spaces. Simply placing a natural park in any urban community will not necessarily precipitate rapid improvements in individual and community well-being. To ensure creation of a natural park that residents will ultimately use and benefit from, planners and natural resource managers must not only support significantly more research, but they must also consider larger community and geographic variables and make an effort to include community members in park development as well. Effective communication and participatory planning appear vital for community buy-in. The landscape features and programs offered at a natural park must meet the needs of community members. Agency mission and policies must, to the extent possible, reflect the attitudes and beliefs of the intended neighborhood users. Site staff should be trained to ensure their ability to effectively interact and communicate with users who come from multiple ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds and who are seeking diverse experiences. Staffing urban natural parks located in low income areas with personnel who share common racial or cultural characteristics with neighborhood residents is not enough. Staff, planners, and neighborhood stakeholders must work collaboratively to ensure that the

values and needs of users and the values and policies of agencies are focused on meeting the needs of both users and agencies alike.

We suggest that urban neighborhoods, regardless of socioeconomic status or ethnic composition, generally can benefit from the presence of small scale natural parks. We have argued that small scale urban natural parks present urban residents with highly accessible and convenient nature-based recreation opportunities, with the potential for the accompanying benefits associated with physical activity and time spent in nature. We further suggest that recreation researchers should include social networks and social capital theories in research to broaden an understanding of the spectrum of contributions offered by urban neighborhood green spaces. The successful development and maintenance of future urban neighborhood natural parks may depend on more research of the type we have suggested. We are convinced that combining social capital and social networks theories with traditional recreation paradigms will enhance future recreation research as well as provide public and private stakeholders with valuable information about urban nature-based recreation for residents of all races, ethnicities, and income levels.

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