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Connecting people, nature, and culture through metropolitan conservation alliances

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Contents

1. Getting urban people out into nature near where they live
2. Metropolitan conservation alliances
3. What I found missing
4. The movement to bring nature and culture together
5. Natural Neighbors
6. Going deeper

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.

1. 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 U.S. 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.

“The wildest and remotest places on Earth, the most imperiled species on Earth, the chain of life sustaining human life on Earth will be protected only if urban people care about nature.” — *Urban Protected Areas*³

2. 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.

Chicago Wilderness

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 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 ... Millions of people call this region home. We reach beyond the choir to create and sustain a strong conservation constituency.” There is also a cross-cutting theme on climate change.

Elsewhere in the United States

Other metropolitan conservation alliances in the United States have similar membership profiles, but often have somewhat different purposes and activities.

The Central Arizona Conservation Alliance focuses on the desert and mountain protected areas surrounding Phoenix (metropolitan population 3.8 million). Its 60 partner organizations collaborate on regional open space strategies and align the efforts of a diverse network of stakeholders toward shared regional goals. Activities oriented toward the general public include citizen science projects and conservation service days.

In the Portland-Vancouver area of Oregon and Washington (population 2.2 million), the Intertwine Alliance, with some 150 partners, works to “integrate nature more deeply into the region.” “We define nature broadly, as anything other than the built environment, from backyard gardens and street trees to natural areas and neighborhood parks. We recognize and honor all communities' and cultures' definitions and experiences of nature.”

Such conservation alliances also exist in the metropolitan areas of Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Houston, Kansas City, Los Angeles, St. Louis, and San Francisco.

Although there are many other conservation partnership models in the United States, they tend not to be centered on metropolitan areas. Examples are Landscape Conservation Cooperatives led by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and numerous watershed partnerships.

In other countries

Metropolitan conservation alliances tend to have narrower structures or purposes in other countries. Here are five examples:

In Bristol, England, the major project of the Bristol Natural History Consortium is an annual Festival of Nature, which has expanded to include events throughout the West of England. Bristol, home of the BBC Natural History Unit, as well as film schools and independent filmmakers, is also home to Wildscreen, a major international nature film festival held every two years.

In metropolitan Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the Mosaico Carioca de Áreas Protegidas (Carioca Mosaic of Protected Areas – *Carioca* is an adjective for Rio) includes national, state, and local protected area agencies, as well as the venerable Rio de Janeiro Botanical Garden, managed by the national Ministry of the Environment. The 112-mile (180-kilometer) Transcarioca Trail, a project of the Mosaic, runs through many of their natural parks.

Near Sydney, Australia, the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute focuses on the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, which covers 2.5 million acres (1 million hectares) west of Sydney. The Institute works to make the area “understood, valued, and cared for by residents and visitors,” and also strives to be a “regionally focused center of excellence ... encouraging innovative world-class conservation policy and management delivered in partnership with local communities.” Its members are New South Wales state and local agencies, a museum, an NGO, botanic gardens, and universities.

In Edinburgh, Scotland, Edinburgh Living Landscape is a partnership of the Scottish Wildlife Trust, two other NGOs, the city, and the Royal Botanical Garden Edinburgh. It works to create, restore, and connect green spaces, especially grassland habitats, and reconnect urban people to their natural environment.

Museums and conservation agencies sometimes cooperate in holding one-off events. A few years ago, Hong Kong Country Parks, along with a botanic garden and WWF-Hong Kong, jointly sponsored a temporary exhibit at the world-class Hong Kong History Museum, “Biodiversity in Hong Kong,” demonstrating the richness of the area’s indigenous animal life and the importance of preserving it.

3. 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), I visited museums, zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens, science centers, museums of regions and cities, and protected areas in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, London,

Paris, Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Sydney, and Melbourne.³ I was struck by a general lack of systematic cooperation among these organizations. I was also struck by (a) the failure of most museums and similar institutions to show visitors where to go to experience nature where they live; (b) a lack of exhibits about local nature; and (c) the failure in many such institutions to sell books on nature in their regions. Let me describe these one by one:

(a) 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.” This can be done by staff or with maps, models of terrain, kiosks, websites, apps, or brochures. Conversely, visitor centers in protected areas can publicize nearby museums where they can learn more about nature. And museums can publicize each other, but this rarely happens.

There are fine exceptions, for example:

An initiative in Chicago could easily be replicated widely. On summer weekends, National Park Service 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 and how they can get there.

At the Oakland Museum of California, panels include a map and information about the nearby East Bay Regional Parks, which include many natural areas, some of which are accessible by city bus.

At London’s Natural History Museum, the Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity helps individuals and groups record, monitor, and protect the country’s biodiversity, including with research assistance and by providing access to the museum’s library and reference collections of plants, animals, fossils, rocks, and minerals.

(b) 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. Entrances to zoos far from Africa, for example, can feature buildings in pseudo-African style with piped-in tribal music. 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.

Even where there are exhibits of species found in the locality or region, they may not be labeled as such. For example, a zoo has a compound of bighorn sheep labeled “native to “western North America” and doesn’t mention that hundreds of them are still living in the wild in nearby mountains.

There are good examples of what can be done:

The Oakland Museum of California’s Gallery of California Natural Sciences focuses on seven places that depict the state’s ecological diversity, including Oakland.

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 (e.g., mountain lion, black bear, California condor) or found there in the past (grizzly bear, although not the California subspecies, which is extinct; and jaguar, not found there since the 1860s.).

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 from the city, and an exhibit of some 40 specimens of birds found on Long Island.

Among museums of cities and regions, the Chicago History Museum has exhibits on over-trapping of fur animals and deforestation in the 19th century.

Aquariums are often focused on their regions. The exhibits at the Aquarium of the Pacific in metropolitan Los Angeles focus on the marine environments of Southern California, Baja California (Mexico), and the

Pacific Ocean more generally, including places nearby. Effects of climate change, such as sea rise and coastal storm surges, are emphasized.

(c) 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, a very small fraction of millions is a large number and is 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 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. Typically they carry generic nature books for children and maybe a few generic books for adults, such as photographic essays on mammals of the world.

In Los Angeles, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County sells a few nature guides focused on California. The Los Angeles Zoo and the California Science Center have none.

In Chicago, the Field Museum and the Brookfield Zoo once had serious natural science bookstores that attracted graduate students from local universities, but these were closed some years ago.

The Bronx Zoo in New York City carries only generic titles, mainly for children, although there are many nature guides available for New York City and its region.

Good examples can be found of what can be done, but they are few and far between.

4. 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. Cultural landscapes started to be protected in Europe in the mid-19th century as part of early nature conservation movements. In the 1890s, as John Muir and his friends were starting the Sierra Club in California, followers of John Ruskin were founding Britain's National Trust. But while the Sierra Club and other mainstream U.S. conservation groups focused on natural areas and wildlife, the British National Trust went on to protect buildings and villages, as well as natural areas, and in the U.S. nature conservation and historic preservation went their separate ways.

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. In a special issue of UNESCO's *World Heritage* magazine, "Culture-Nature Links" (April 2015), Kishore Rao, then Director of the World Heritage Center, pointed out 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." Rao went on to call attention to "a new strategy of close collaboration between World Heritage ... and other protected areas through a comprehensive conservation effort."

In the same issue of *World Heritage*, Peter Bille Larsen and Gamini Wijesuriya describe six trends leading to nature-culture integration in the World Heritage System: (a) questioning by scholars of the conceptual split between nature and culture; (b) increasing use of the World Heritage Convention in parts of the world where this split is challenged; (c) recognizing that nature and culture are dynamic, coevolving systems; (d) a shift away from heritage as the domain of experts to one building on local perspectives and values that often defy narrow nature-culture distinctions;

and (e) realizing that practitioners in cultural and natural heritage have developed methods often in isolation from each other.⁴

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).

United States National Park Service

A similar movement has been taking place in the U.S. National Park Service. In 2012, at the request of then Director Jonathan Jarvis, the Science Committee of the National Park System Advisory Board reviewed the goals and policies of resource management in the National Park System. 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, independently... Artificial division of the National Park System into 'natural parks' and 'cultural parks' is ineffective and a detriment to successful resource management."⁵

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."⁶ The Order states (underlining in original): "The overarching goal of resource stewardship (stewardship goal) is to manage NPS resources in a context of continuous change that we do not fully understand, in order to:

- preserve and restore ecological, historical, and cultural integrity;

- contribute as an ecological and cultural core of national and international networks of protected lands, waters, and resources; and
- provide visitors and program participants with opportunities for transformative experiences that educate and inspire...

“To achieve the stewardship goal, the NPS will:

- integrate the management of natural and cultural resources, where beneficial to resource stewardship;
- adopt and apply new conservation concepts and guiding strategies for resource stewardship;
- update and sustain the NPS workforce; and
- incorporate these concepts, policies, and actions into appropriate management documents.” [Section 3]

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.

Although they are not units of the National Park System, National Heritage Areas are designated by Congress and receive advice from NPS. There are 49 of these community-led places “where historic, cultural, and natural resources combine to form cohesive, nationally important landscapes.”

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 include literature, but not history or cultural heritage. An interesting exception is the Chicago Cultural Alliance, whose core members are 35 ethnic museums and centers. The Alliance works to “connect, promote, and support centers of cultural heritage for a more inclusive Chicago.” It originated in an exhibit and events sponsored by the Field Museum’s Center for Cultural

Understanding and Change, and its partner institutions include the Field and the Brookfield Zoo.

5. 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. The name is being protected as a service mark, but that is only to prevent its misuse.

Originally, the rationale behind Natural Neighbors focused on nature: Urban people need to spend time in nature for their own good, and because nature conservation locally and globally depends on their support; people will value nature only if they experience it where they live. 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 and core objectives remain 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:

- 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

Conservation areas and historic sites to:

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

All such organizations to:

- 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

Natural Neighbors is led by InterEnvironment Institute, in cooperation with the World Commission on Protected Areas and the Species Survival Commission of IUCN. Its advisory committee includes prominent people from the conservation and museum worlds.⁷

Natural Neighbors has been discussed at events during the 2014 IUCN World Parks Congress in Sydney, the 2015 George Wright Society Conference in Oakland, and the 2016 World Conservation Congress in Hawai'i. A roundtable and informal discussions at the 2016 WCC included representatives of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Botanic Gardens Conservation International, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, Singapore Zoo, Royal Ontario Museum, Parks Canada, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. National Park Service, Brookfield Zoo, Field Museum, and Chicago Botanic Garden.

In Los Angeles, 20 agencies and institutions have agreed to participate in Natural Neighbors Southern California; these are listed on the website, www.NaturalNeighbors.org. Themes under discussion include: increasing visits through cross-promotion and better communication, engaging with underserved local communities and groups, and increasing public awareness of climate change and 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. One of these is New York City, where I met in January with senior NPS staff.

In Jamaica, a planning team is developing a Natural Neighbours project for Kingston. There is also strong interest in Natural Neighbors in Israel and in Brazil.

In Brazil, in fact, the concept of bringing nature and culture together in urban protected areas was quick to take root. Pedro da Cunha e Menezes, a Brazilian diplomat who was shepherding several projects in Rio de Janeiro related to the 2016 Rio Olympics, is a Deputy Chair of the IUCN WCPA Urban Conservation Strategies Specialist Group, which I lead. When Pedro learned of our initiative, he decided to include several cultural sites along the Transcarioca Trail, mentioned above: a history museum, an art museum, an open sculpture garden, and a monument commemorating the history of Sugarloaf Mountain.

5. Going deeper

I've outlined the rationale for metropolitan alliances that bring together people, nature, and culture; discussed basic structures and functions; and set out a few examples. There is much more to consider. Let me just list a few things here that should be discussed in the informal networks that have started to form around them, as well as existing forums such as IUCN and the George Wright Society.

- Looking at things from the standpoints of the people we are trying to serve.
- Building strong urban constituencies for protecting natural and cultural heritage.
- Reaching decision-makers, opinion shapers, and social and political elites generally. Everyone needs to experience local nature and local culture, and leadership can emerge from any part of society, but we shouldn't be shy about targeting.

- Developing new leaders through training, internships, and working with high schools and universities.
- 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 and social groups who are uncomfortable entering natural places and museums where they don't see people like themselves.
- Understanding that different kinds of institutions — zoos, aquariums, natural history museums, botanic gardens, tamer and wilder nature reserves — attract different ages and kinds of visitors.
- Finding local symbols that capture the public imagination, such as an animal or plant species or an historic trail.
- Drawing on the concept of spirit of place.
- Being flexible about the “catchment areas” of metropolitan conservation alliances. For example, in localities where many people have cars and go on road trips over long weekends, inner and outer circles may be appropriate: one set of places in and around the urbanized area, another set farther away.
- Deciding whether to include various kinds of organizations, for example, public libraries, schools, activist groups, businesses, professional societies.
- Deciding whether to include various themes, such as public health, food, or agriculture.
- Considering whether the terms “conservation alliance” and “Natural Neighbors” are adequate to embrace culture. (I think they are, but I'm biased.)

- 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 to build a solid intellectual foundation for this enterprise. Relevant ideas include, for instance, bioculturalism, sense of belonging, and the regionalist ideas of Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford.
- Realizing that lateral thinkers are important. Harlan Cleveland (1918-2008), an American diplomat and educator who I knew when he was president of the World Academy of Art and Science, wrote that “All real-world problems are interdisciplinary, interprofessional, and international ... A committee of narrow thinkers doesn’t produce integrative outcomes. The best interdisciplinary instrument is still the individual human mind.”

Notes

1. Ted Trzyna: President, InterEnvironment Institute; Chair, IUCN WCPA Urban Conservation Strategies Specialist Group. www.Trzyna.info. I appreciate comments from 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, North Carolina: Algonquin Books, 2005.)
3. I visited a total of 60 places in these cities, which of course does not add up to going to each kind of place in every city.
4. In *World Heritage 75*, April 2015, Special Issue, “Culture-Nature Links”: Kishore Rao, Editorial, p. 3. Peter Bille Larsen and Gamini Wijesuriya, “Nature-Culture Linkages in World Heritage: Bridging the Gap,” pp. 6-8.

5. Revisiting Leopold: Resource stewardship in the national parks: A report of the National Park System Advisory Board Science Committee. (Washington: The Committee, 2012.)

6. USNPS Director's Order 100, 20 December 2016, Resource Stewardship for the 21st Century. (Full text at https://www.nps.gov/policy/dorders/do_100.htm.)

7. For background, see www.NaturalNeighbors.org.

8. Harlan Cleveland, *The Knowledge Executive* (New York: Truman Talley Books, 1985), 220. I have written about this elsewhere, e.g., Thaddeus C. (Ted) Trzyna, Integrating Ideas & Organizations toward a New Paradigm. *Eruditio* 1:6 (April 2015). www.eruditio.worldacademy.org. -- Integrative thought and action. <http://www.interenvironment.org/integrative-thought---action.html>.