London as the World’s First National Park City

By Tim Beatley

At Biophilic Cities, we are frequently suggesting the need to reimagine cities and urban life. We need a new narrative, a new story that blends the natural and the cultural. We believe that future cities should aspire to an immersive vision of nature and we often suggest the need to transition from designing parks in cities to a vision of a city as a park.

The work of geographer and National Geographic Explorer Daniel Raven-Ellison is moving us close to such a vision, through what he calls a National Park City. For him, it flows from a personal commitment and public priorities.

Raven-Ellison has been doing many things to raise awareness for this idea. He recently completed a “Big Walk Around London” covering 560 kilometers and crossing the Thames River some eleven times. You can see here the spiral route he took, speaking with people along the way. I followed his progress on Twitter and was amazed at his obvious stamina as he conducted many walking conversations with various citizens and officials along the way.

Raven-Ellison is busy building support in other ways too. One major initiative has been publishing a map of the Greater London National Park City. It is beautiful, at once a practical guide to where to find nature, and a useful guide for residents to see how they might enjoy nearby nature (and how remarkably close it is). It also a tool for grasping the larger concept and for seeding a new mental map of the city. Already, 6,000 copies have been distributed. There is also a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds to plant wildflowers — 9 million wildflowers actually, one for every resident of London.

I spoke recently with Daniel about the genesis of this work. It grew for him out of the experience of visiting all fifteen of the UK’s national parks, and finding the lack of any urban connection curious: “I just wondered why it was that considering the fact that 10% of England, and 7% of the United Kingdom, is urban habitat, why that kind of habitat wasn’t reflected within the family of national parks.” Cities are also places of remarkable agency for residents, Daniel tells me: “I have incredible power to influence my street, my garden, my house, my local community.” In these ways, urban communities have significant power to shape future nature. By “flipping”, in a big way, our mental gamechanger. There is more land area in Greater London National Park than there is in the homes and offices that make up the built environment.

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London undeveloped, and in some degree of natural state, than there is in the homes and offices that make up the built environment.

I believe that they will reach a majority of wards voting in favor (only one has voted against so far). There is also an online petition and he has attracted the support of London Mayor Sadiq Khan. What the designation will ultimately mean in practice is unclear — no new budgetary or planning powers would derive from it. The effects will be more mental and perceptual; a shift that will hopefully, in turn, convert to new personal commitments and public priorities.

Daniel and I spoke of applying this idea to other cities. Washington, DC, another capital city (and home to the National Geographic Society), might be a logical next step. There are natural synergies with the idea of DC as a National Park City, as DC is also a partner city in the Biophilic Cities Network. And in DC’s case there are already more than thirty different U.S. National Park System units within the city (Rock Creek Park and Anacostia Park to name just two) making the idea even more appropriate. We can only hope that the idea catches on. Daniel speaks of the first reactions that he gets when he introduces the idea of a National Park City: “On the whole people tend to think ‘this is crazy.’ But then you explain to them the idea and they think ‘okay, that’s pretty awesome, how can I get involved?’”

Greater London National Park City Initiative: http://www.nationalparkcitylondon.org

Resources:


