Urban National Parks or National Park Cities?

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Fig 1: Could cities like Durham provide models for Urban National Parks?  
(Photo: Visit Britain/Thomas Heaton)

The title ‘National Park’ is anchored in mid-19th century exploration of the then largely undiscovered (to western eyes) grand landscapes of mainland United States. Sometimes described as America’s ‘best idea’, the title has evolved into a label that indicates an international designation categorised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). In the United Kingdom (UK), the ‘National Park’ designation was established under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, to protect highly valued landscapes. More recently, the Environment Act of 1995 broadened this aim - not least to ensure the socio-economic well-being of local communities living with them.

Globally the National Park concept has evolved since its origins. Many National Parks are now recognised under the IUCN Category II ‘Protected Areas’. These are protected and ‘managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation’. However, UK National Parks fall under category V ‘Protected Landscape/Seascape’, which are ‘a protected area managed mainly for landscape/seascape protection and recreation’. The UK’s National Park boundaries contain significant human settlements and infrastructure, are managed and cultivated cultural landscapes, and are mostly privately owned.

The possibility of ‘Urban National Parks’ is an area of growing interest. However, existing documentation and discourse provides a poor articulation of their conceptual basis. In the UK,
London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, has stated that he wants to make London the world’s first ‘National Park City’, with plans to increase physical greenspace; tackle waste and pollution; and promote cleaner energy. The proposal has been met with some enthusiasm, however, there is little robust information on how this vision will be realised, what benefits may be delivered, nor how it differs from other initiatives - such as urban green infrastructure planning, or ‘salutogenic city’ concepts.

Fig. 2: Lincoln’s Inn, London (Photo: Clive Davies)

If ‘Urban National Parks’ are not to draw criticism for being little more than ‘appropriation of a term’ then having a conceptual basis is a necessity not a luxury. A recent World Urban Parks short paper asked whether a ‘National Park City’ could be defined in terms of conservation, development and logistic support i.e. primarily in terms of ecosystem services. These functions have many similarities with existing urban green infrastructure (UGI) planning approaches.

Contrary to what has been claimed for London, the idea of a ‘National Park’ in an urban context has already been interpreted and developed by various cities and countries, albeit with variation in purpose and nomenclature, including Urban National Park, National City Park and National Park City. Research on the Stockholm Ulriksdal-Haga-Brunsviken-Djurgården National Urban Park or ‘Ecopark’ suggests that ‘constructing the National City Park as a place relied on considerable abstraction’. The Park was founded in 1995 and stretches over 27km² (6,672 acres) in total, including 19km² (4,695 acres) of land and 8km² (1,977 acres) of water. This blue/green space includes the Fjäderholmarna Islands, part of the Stockholm Archipelago in the Baltic Sea. The primary function of its establishment was to try and protect the area from development pressures and identify, or label, a function which would counteract the idea that this was vacant land.

The idea of a National Park was identified as useful in another urban case at Jamaica Bay, New York City in order to limit ‘the alteration of undeveloped shoreline’ of an 73 km² (18,000 acre) wetland estuary. The area within the park boundary does not include adjacent residential and green spaces. It primarily designates and protects the tidal wetlands and pools and associated land areas. The area is mostly devoted to recreational infrastructure. It was created ‘so that people could experience nature in the midst of crowds…. for those who may not have a chance to go to Yosemite or Yellowstone’, so it aligns with the existing US National Park concept in that it does not include areas where people actually live but provides a ‘playground’ nearby; it is situated within the highly built up New York city of 8.4 million people.
In an aim to unpack both the uncertainties and possibilities of Urban National Parks, an investigative project was established, funded by the Catherine Cookson Foundation at Newcastle University, UK, with collaborators at Edinburgh University and the University of Copenhagen. The rest of this article summarises some of the key themes to emerge from this project, focussing in particular on those aspects germane to urban planning.

**Emerging issues**

*Use of National Park as a term and concept*

The National Park concept in Britain is very different from others elsewhere in the world, although today it has much in common with near neighbours in continental Europe. It has been described as ‘an imaginative step that extended the idea of preservation from wilderness reserves to the countryside at large’\(^1\). Designation recognises the importance of both human and natural processes in creating special places, including vegetation, underlying geology, biodiversity, the heritage and vernacular buildings, landscape management and local culture(s).

How might this then translate to the context of urban areas? In particular, how does it work with an urban typology? The very fabric and nature of urban areas, including substantial numbers of buildings, grey infrastructure, dereliction, pollution, social and cultural fragmentation, loss of landscape character, and much more, can seem alien to the idea of a National Park.

An important characteristic of National Parks in Britain is that they have special planning authorities and clear management plans based on retaining particular character and quality of the landscape, recreation and access. A key question than arises: How might the designation of urban national park impact upon existing formal planning processes and how would this affect the character and functions of the city?

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*Fig. 3: Yorkshire Dales National Park: How does this model translate to and urban context? (Photo: Clive Davies)*
Health & Wellbeing

The desire to improve the health of those living and working in cities is identified as a key potential of those supporting both Urban National Parks generally and the London National City Park proposal specifically. However evidence that parks and green spaces can improve people’s physical and psychological health, as well as issues such as alleviating air pollution, have long been identified within the idea of green infrastructure planning. How then might Urban National Parks differ from what is currently on offer?

Lessons can be taken from the National Forest and Community Forests initiatives, which have created multifunctional green spaces and woodland areas from former derelict areas in the urban fringes of some of Britain’s least affluent cities. Ideas are also emerging from other cultures such as ‘forest bathing’ or Shinrin-yoku - a form of Japanese therapy - available within reach of the least-green neighbourhoods. Perhaps more fundamentally, new Urban National Park authorities could be models of vertical policy integration, where local public health priorities, set by Health and Wellbeing Boards, are integrated into planning policy at all levels, i.e. in core strategies through to site allocations and development management policies. In the London case it is unknown whether such thinking and the resource implications have been considered.

Biodiversity, Ecology, People and Place: How to live in close proximity with wildlife

In the UK, engagement with nature varies greatly from household to household and disconnection with nature results in reduced consideration of biodiversity conservation. However, it is generally accepted that when people are engaged with nature they will be more eager to preserve it locally and more supportive of new interventions. Long-term studies of urban gardens and urban wildlife initiatives provide the evidence of the opportunities for engagement in urban areas. A more positive creation of mutually beneficial interactions with biodiversity and natural processes in urban areas could form the basis of a holistic approach that would induce fundamental changes to the way we plan, construct, live and work in cities.

From a planning perspective, however, the long-standing concept of ecological networks is regarded as key to the success of nature in both the urban and rural context. Such networks require good connectivity, and this is likely to be more difficult in urban situations when built form has disaggregated the landscape. Ecological connectivity is one of the characteristics of urban green infrastructure planning and this returns us to the relationship between urban green infrastructure planning and Urban National Park designation.

If delivery of an urban green infrastructure plan represents the ‘substance’ behind the title, Urban National Park, then notable challenges arise in planning terms. For instance, to what extent could redevelopment reconnect green areas together in an Urban National Park, and should this be a material reason for giving planning permissions? Should Urban National Parks abandon any existing presumptions in favour of redeveloping former brownfield sites if such sites have become ecologically rich? And should urban green infrastructure plans in a National Park City be uplifted in their importance from a mere supplementary planning document (SPD) or local plan policy to the status of a separate legally enforceable statutory plan?

Branding bandwagon doomed to failure?

An initial examination of the London National Park City concept seems to suggest that much of the discourse is superficial, with few substantive proposals behind it; that is unless the concept is the ‘gloss coat’ on top of the ‘All London Green Grid’, the latter being an actionable existing strategy.
Perhaps then, the London National Park City only exists as a vision? A visionary approach should not be decried, but in the absence of sufficient resources including plans, finance, people and most of all longevity, it is likely to be a fragile even transient concept.

The history of England’s Community Forests provides pertinent evidence. In their initial stages, they were visionary, well-resourced and with abundant opportunities for changing damaged and derelict land. However, Community Forests were also non-statutory, and this turned out to be a great weakness. As governmental priorities changed, matters became more difficult, and while some were reinvented in other guises, others failed. The lesson is clear; sustenance without a legal framework is a hard road that only a few can manage.

The debacle over Heatherwick’s proposed Garden Bridge in London, abandoned due to financial issues, provides another example of the difficulties of turning visions into reality. In many funding schemes, there is often money for capital projects, but none for running costs and this is why so many city parks are already in a state of crisis in the UK.

What’s in a name: Urban area or city?

In National Parks, conserving the heritage and culture that has created the qualities so highly valued is of key importance; but how does that work in a multi-cultural, diverse and vast area such as a capital city? Moreover, can a city with a lot of parks and greenspaces be labelled a National Park City or should this title convey something more? Where should an Urban National Park boundary be drawn? Will this include urban fringe and greenbelt areas, since these probably contain the most opportunities in terms of health, wellbeing, biodiversity and climate change adaptation?

The choice of ‘city’ versus ‘urban’ is also interesting. ‘Urban’ is often used in a neutral or even derogatory way in common parlance whereas ‘city’ is often used as a pronoun and is deemed to have a life of its own that is identifiable. These issues of terminology relate to branding and raise further questions about what exactly is being proposed and whether such ideas are merely publicity exercises.

It is also necessary to consider what scale is suitable for Urban National Parks; perhaps a middle-sized city that has a clearer physical, socio-cultural and landscape identity would be a more appropriate candidate than a sprawling international or capital city? As part of the project brief, the team considered a number of possible case studies to test out the translation of concepts to real life situations. Durham, Northeast England, might be such an example; the city has an outstanding natural setting, with a World Heritage Site at its core.

On the above terms, it would be easy to consider Durham having an Urban National Park designation. Yet within the same city, there is the legacy of mining and urban deprivation with a far less appealing local landscape. Should one designate the best parts of this City and leave out the least good? And what would be the consequences socially and economically of that? More fundamentally, is designating a city as an Urban National Park or National Park City a gentrifying concept?

Justice & participation

In 1810 William Wordsworth suggested that ‘persons of pure taste...deem the [Lake] district a sort of national property in which every man has a right and an interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy’. The National Park movement has very clearly been linked to green consciousness and democratic ideals about social access to the landscape. What then should the role of citizens be in Urban National Parks? The English National Parks provide a model with regard to land ownership,
but how could the principles of public access work with the many private green spaces in cities such as in London?

There is, therefore, a need to consider equality and accessibility, as well as the role of local communities. The example of the ‘All London Green Grid’ is again useful here. The development of this initiative is dependent on the action of many individuals and engagement with the relevant London Boroughs. The London narrative includes the role of individual gardens with the municipality providing seed corn funding. By extension, is there a social empowerment programme potential for Urban National Parks that could provide wider ‘green engagement’ through organisations such as RSPB?

Ways forward

The concept of Urban National Parks seems to provide opportunities for developing new, more holistic approaches to landscape-scale planning for urban areas. A return to the concepts and principles of National Parks, which have developed over more than a 100 years, is helpful in trying to understand the values and ideals embedded within all landscapes as well as many other practical matters such as the opportunities for connecting people with landscapes and developing adjunct agendas such as health and well-being, social justice and so on.

However, caution is needed, as the term ‘National Park’ is a global kitemark for quality that deserves to be preserved, since to devalue one is to devalue all. For that reason, designation of an Urban National Park requires the same degree of due-diligence and independent scrutiny that apply to more conventional designated landscape settings. In particular, it needs to be backed by robust, multi-layered and appropriately resourced and structured support mechanisms, covering planning, governance and spatial integrity. Least acceptable of all, is appropriation of the term or self-designation; these should be avoided at all cost.

Since a number of cities are thinking about how Urban National Park designation might help them, investigation is needed to provide the evidence and guidance on possible approaches. The following questions identify some of the opportunities for further examination:

- How might the material considerations of organisation and empowerment be addressed? This encompasses governance models and democratic oversight, statutory or non-statutory status, finance and the need for dedicated enabling.
- What are the headline policy drivers starting with their role in community health & wellbeing, climate change mitigation and adaptation, sustainable development, biodiversity and landscape quality?
- Are proposals a late flowering of National Park thinking applied to an urban situation, or a completely novel, once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-conceptualise how we develop and manage urban areas?
- Who has the competence to mandate designation and within what framework, so as to protect the integrity of the title and avoid valueless self-designations that lack substance?
- Where do the boundaries lie, if they lie at all, both physically and metaphorically?
- If designation of Urban National Parks became an international endeavour, what are the planning implications in terms of national policy, local plans and development management?
- Is there an Urban National Park typology and, if not, what might such a typology entail?
• How can existing initiatives be built upon rather than wasted? There is no blank canvass in urban areas.

In practice, the first steps towards the development of Urban National Parks would require investigation into how urban communities would engage positively or negatively (and to what extent) with the concept. An investigation of the extent of public support for the values embedded within such an idea would be important in determining how policy could be developed and public finances allocated in order to deal with the complexities of such issues such as rights of access, rights of designation and planning powers.

While our investigation indicates that there is potential for the idea of Urban National Parks, present indications in the UK suggest that a much more serious and deep investigation is needed to provide a strong and sustainable basis for developing proposals. There is much to be learned from re-examining both the establishment of National Parks in England, Scotland and elsewhere as well as the experiments in and around towns and cities such as Community Forests. Such a re-examination would help define a potentially visionary approach, which is backed up by community consent, has buy-in from government, and has a clear understanding of the gains and potential losses inherent therein.

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\[\text{ii} \text{ Although this phrase is often attributed to Wallace Stegner (1909-1993), the American novelist and environmentalist, it is also suggested that the notion came from the politician and academic James Bryce (1838-1922) who was British Ambassador to the USA. See Alan MacEachern’s (2016) discussion on this at http://niche-canada.org/2011/10/23/who-had-americas-best-idea/}\]
\[\text{iii} \text{ See Sadiq Khan’s Manifesto for London http://www.sadiq.london/a_greener_cleener_london}\]
iv A list of supporters of the idea and references to news items can be found on Raven-Ellison’s webpage http://www.nationalparkcity.london/in_the_news. An online petition has been signed by over one thousand supporters of the idea according to an article in the Ecologist, see Scott, L.A. (2014) ‘He is bonkers?’ Daniel Raven-Ellison on a Greater London National Park’. The Ecologist [online]. Available https://theecologist.org/2014/oct/07/he-bonkers-daniel-raven-ellison-greater-london-national-park


vi See for example GREEN SURGE http://www.greensurge.eu


xix Financial Times reports: ‘92% of park managers have had their budgets cut over the past three years, and nearly all expect further declines’. See Plimmer, G. (2016) ‘UK parks endangered by council spending cuts, MPs warned’. Financial Times. Available https://www.ft.com/content/39164258-8634-11e6-a29c-6e7d9515ad15


xviii In 2016 the local authority spending cuts meant that the maintenance of parks is under threat as the Financial Time reports: ‘92% of park managers have had their budgets cut over the past three years, and nearly all expect further declines’. See Plimmer, G. (2016) ‘UK parks endangered by council spending cuts, MPs warned’. Financial Times. Available https://www.ft.com/content/39164258-8634-11e6-a29c-6e7d9515ad15