

EDITOR'S CHOICE



Cultivating Health and Well-Being through Environmental Stewardship

Thanks to long-standing and ongoing scientific research and community engagement, we widely appreciate the health benefits of a clean environment. Trees, native vegetation, parks, and open spaces are valued throughout the world. After a century of urban park development, we are still uncovering the importance of these spaces to a wide range of social and cultural groups across the life course. As a research social scientist for the USDA Forest Service, I work with park managers, policy advisors, and researchers from cities as diverse as Baltimore, Chicago, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Los Angeles. I have found that an urban park, greenway, or tree-lined street is often sacred to the community that surrounds it. Traditionally the mention of the Forest Service brings to mind remote wilderness areas, logging roads, fire towers, and uniformed rangers caring for public lands west of the Mississippi River. With more than half of the world's population living in cities, however, urban quality of life issues are commanding increased attention, including from natural resource agencies.

Our tendency is to view the green and gray infrastructures of a city as being at odds with each other. Perhaps this division stems from focusing on the development of a particular park or property rather than on understanding these spaces as part of a much larger system of well-being. The legacy of Fredrick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), a visionary landscape architect, reminds us that this system includes not only roads and buildings, rivers and streams, but also people. Yet, what matters to communities is not only the presence of trees, parks, and open spaces, but access to them. Local neighborhood spaces that offer residents regular engagement with nature have an important impact on individual and collective well-being. Whereas a visit to Yosemite National Park evokes the incredible majesty and expanse that such places have to offer, it is the neighborhood park, the water's edge, and the tree-lined walk that continue to nurture families every day. In this sense, there is one forest. We are all responsible for cultivating its vitality, especially if its benefits are to extend to everyone across a broad spectrum of physical, social, and economic conditions.

Public health encompasses an enormous range of activities and is not confined to clinics or hospitals. Because of what we know about the wholesome role of trees, parks, and open spaces, we would do well to consider the park worker, the city

forester, and the citizen steward as a type of public health champion. Their efforts result not only in providing a clean, green space (or healthy tree canopy) but in creating the opportunity for the everyday maintenance of our physical and mental health. A recent study found that local, urban stewardship groups are prevalent in cities throughout the Northeast (Svendsen ES, Campbell LK. Urban ecological stewardship: understanding the structure, function and network of community-based urban land management. *Cities Environ*. 2008;1(1):1–32). Related research found thousands of active organizations in New York City alone dedicated to conserving, managing, monitoring, advocating for, and educating the public about local urban environments (Fisher DR, Campbell LK, Svendsen ES. The organizational structure of urban environmental stewardship. *Env Polit*. In press). This is a powerful reminder that in addition to clear air and water, there is a wide range of reasons why urban residents care about the environment—for the sake of beauty, shade, memory, shelter, identity, and future generations.

The desire for a healthy urban environment has led individual volunteers, civic groups, park managers and philanthropic leaders to create their own version of an ecological public health system or ecosystem centered around trees, waterways, parks, gardens, and open spaces. Understanding that these elements are critical to public health is relevant to any setting, rural or urban. Yet, there is something quite unique about the urban ecosystem—human density. In urban park settings, people come together through conversation and engagement in stewardship practices that create a sense of belonging, strengthen people's trust in each other, and cultivate a general sense of well-being. Environmental stewardship triggers a positive cycle of reciprocity between ourselves and the world that surrounds us. This cycle embodies the Forest Service motto: *Caring for the land and serving people*. ■

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