

Natural New York

***Essay on the overlooked
beauty of urban greenspace***



By Peter Toubanos

Introduction

Earlier this year, I was speaking to a coworker who lives in Long Island and commutes to Queens where we both work. A Brooklyn native, this coworker said she was not a huge fan of Long Island. In her words, she likes how easy it is to park her car when shopping and the accessibility to nature. Anything else, she can take or leave. My eyebrow raised a bit when I heard her last point. Having made the opposite move of coming from Long Island to New York City, I find that there are so many fewer opportunities to engage with “nature” living in the suburbs than in the city.

Let me explain.

Growing up, I had very limited interest in nature. Besides my backyard, I did not spend much time outdoors. Long Island and the majority of American suburbs are designed with cars in mind. Most trips involved walking out my front door, getting into a car, being driven to our destination, and then stepping outside a minute or two before getting inside another building. Of course, I did have the occasional day spent at the beach or a public park,

but for my day to day routine there was not much reason to go outside.

My lifestyle changed dramatically moving to New York City for college. At this point, it was routine that I start walking from destination to destination, something that was not easily done in the sprawl of Long Island. Soon after, I picked up bicycling as an option that allowed me to get from place to place while spending time outdoors. The expansive New York City park system allowed me the chance to easily take a break from my day, sit down and enjoy the natural sights and sounds around me. Grass and trees might be more present in suburban areas, but they are much more limited to private property and there are not as many opportunities to just waltz into a park and sit down in the grass. In the city, you sit in a park on your lunch break. Friends ask to meet up in parks. This does not happen in an automobile driven landscape. I have a friend from Los Angeles who once told me just sitting with friends in parks is something she really prefers about New York over L.A. while we were having an impromptu hangout in Tompkins Square Park. According to

her, this just doesn't happen there. It doesn't really happen in any automobile landscape, even if we tend to think of those as "greener" communities.

But I understood what my coworker was saying about nature even if I don't agree. There are many places on Long Island where one can enjoy expanses of green grass, forested woods, sandy beaches, and so much more. Many of these places are beautiful and I have many pleasant memories visiting them. But in the city that's not where I am spending most of my time outside. My time outside is walking to the corner store or standing outside on an elevated train track. It's a morning bike ride or a walk around the neighborhood. It's only when I became a city resident that I started to stop and take a closer look at flowers, try to identify the birds, seek out different types of trees, among other activities that can be done at almost any given moment. Even those developed urbanized areas have some trees hanging around. Nature exists in the city and for those who pay attention and seek it out they will find a rewarding experience. In a suburb, I don't get this experience. I can peer out

the car window at manicured lawns, but god forbid I step on them.

"Nature" as it exists in the American psyche conjures up dramatic images of the beautiful landforms that make up the nation. Whether it be the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, the Sequoias in California, the Everglades in Florida, Niagara Falls in New York, or the White Sands desert in New Mexico are all without a doubt marvelous to look at and worth seeing at least once in your life.

However, for the vast majority of the population, these are distant tourist attractions that are not a part of our daily life. National parks, places that have no human habitation, have become synonymous with nature in the US. It's as if somehow humans have designated human life and nature into two separate facets of life, when in reality, they are intertwined in significant ways. There is an unfortunate invented idea that comes with conservation in which nature is a place that is untouched by humans. This is a narrative built upon the ugly history of colonialism as well as the greed of

tourism. Consider Yellowstone National Park, one of the nation's most beautiful and famous national parks. This was at one time a region where the Nez Perce, Shoshone, and Crow tribes had coexisted with the natural environment. They were subsequently removed after bloody battles in the 1870s, around when President Ulysses S. Grant dedicated the land as protected federal land that was used solely for recreational purposes.

Should we be protecting nature? Absolutely. But to protect solely for tourism seems misguided. There should not be a clear separation of the built world and the natural world. Nature is not separate from everyday life, but rather is a part of it. This was what life was like before we decided certain land needed to be protected and some was found to build cities on, almost arbitrarily.

For the 8 million people living in America's biggest city, New York, nature seems like a distant attraction. To seek nature means a road trip out of state or at the very least a Metro North ride up to the Hudson Valley. However, nature is

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For the 8 million people living in America's biggest city, New York, nature seems like a distant attraction. To seek nature means a road trip out of state or at the very least a MetroNorth ride up to the Hudson Valley. However, nature is a powerful thing. The Earth is resilient and finds ways to thrive in the most unlikely places, the urban metropolis of New York included.

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Take a visit to any old unused parking lot and you will catch bits of grass peeking out of cracks in the cement. The Earth is resilient and finds ways to thrive in the most unlikely places, the urban metropolis of New York included. The city should be recognized not only as a center for art, style, and culture, but also as a place to enjoy the great outdoors.

I visited SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens in June of 2022 to see the ongoing exhibitions. In the basement I came across three shelves of various jars and bottles containing samples of water, a project of artist Marco Barrera, part of the larger exhibition “In Practice: Literally means collapse”. Each of these containers held a sample of water of various sources related to somewhere in New York City. Locations included the Gowanus Canal, Hell Gate, Bethesda Terrace Fountain, Broad Channel, Lake Champlain in Vermont, the Erie Canal basin in Buffalo, and a faucet at Empire Casino in Yonkers. Seeing this all in one space put into perspective the natural elements that are a necessity in operating an industrialized city. To Barrera, each of these samples can tell the history of the various bodies of water and the people who interact with them every day. In an essay that Barrera penned which sits next to the piece where I learned about the composition of wastewater. In poor communities we find traces of opioids, while in wealthy communities the water is much more riddled with caffeine. I was fascinated with this natural study that was so urban by nature.

*Jonathan Crary has pieced together an essay titled **Scorched Earth: Beyond the Digital Age to a Post-Capitalist World** detailing the incongruities of the digital age with sustaining a post-capitalist society. It's a polemic and jarring book to read that I don't need to get into, but I only want to focus on one particular point he made. Crary writes that "Beginning in the 1850s, to be modern or cosmopolitan meant many things, but above all it required as sweeping disconnection from everything associated with the earthiness of rural existence, the smells and materialities of soil, manure, barnyard animals, along with the tactile immersion in the processes involved in the nurturing of organic life." This according to Crary is a fallacy, disconnected from the reality of urban life and has resulted in unnatural processes in which animals are factory farmed and water is poisoned.*

Like Barrera and like Crary I seek to make the connection between urban life and the natural world. I cannot separate the two. Our urban environments are a product of our environment. I think the first step to realizing that is being familiar with the natural world that permeates

your everyday life. If you can do this you will not see the engineered world quite the same.

This is a short collection of writings related to my conscious effort to get more acquainted with the natural surroundings of my city. My goal is to have a brief sampling of the natural features of the city compact in one space to reorient the reader into a new understanding of urban life.



Birds

Anyone who's picked up the hobby of birdwatching in New York has likely inevitably had this question: "Birdwatching in New York? What are you going to see? Pigeons?"

In reality, there are over 400 bird species that have been recorded in New York City including the illustrative rock pigeon. New York City is located smack in the middle of the Atlantic Flyway which birds migrate to and from warm climates south of the city. Within city limits include multiple rivers, an oceanfront, ponds, and forested areas in which birds make stops along the way. In particular, the salt marshes of Jamaica Bay are an excellent place to see birds. Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Marine Park Salt Marsh Trail, Plumb Beach, and Fort Tilden all surround the bay and provide excellent birding opportunities and would be a good place for an aspiring birder to begin.

Some highlights I've seen in city borders:

black and white warbler, glossy ibis, blue jay, northern cardinal, northern flicker, osprey, peregrine falcon, red tailed hawk, red winged blackbird, wood duck, eastern towhee, common yellowthroat, ruddy turnstone, and many others I'm not expert enough to ID.



Even the very classic New York City pigeon has its own beauty and character that I grew to appreciate as I got into the hobby. Pigeons themselves have a culture around them in this city. Bushwick residents will note flocks of pigeons flying from rooftop to rooftop from time to time. These are pigeons kept by pigeon keepers, once a hobby that was central to the neighborhood, though is now dwindling. If you drive down Stillwell Avenue into Coney Island, you may also notice the Viola Pigeon Club, located in Gravesend just before you pass under the Belt Parkway. Founded by Frank Viola, the club was home to the Frank Viola International, a 400 mile pigeon race between Ohio and New York City.

Birding is an easy hobby that anyone can enjoy. You'll learn a lot about your local ecosystem. Get a pair of binoculars and head out.



Rocks

Geology is one of the many, many natural features of the world that I initially knew very little about before making a deliberate effort to seek out rock-related knowledge in New York City. I spent a handful of hours over a couple days scouring mindat.org and Robert Beard's Rockhounding New York looking for optimal locations to see rocks of note in New York City.

One location in my search stood out to me. Tucked away in an otherwise unremarkable corner of Staten Island is Graniteville Quarry Park. To most who stumble upon it, it's nothing more than a poorly maintained bit of greenery curiously placed next to the busy Forest Ave.

The quarry was noticed in 1977 by Dr. Alan Benimoff, then PhD student at Lehigh University. Benimoff decided to study the quarry as part of a graduate level course on igneous rocks. Expecting to find two contiguous rocks, xenolith and diabase, Benimoff instead found three, the third being trondhjemite.



About 200 million years ago a chunk of xenolith fell into the Palisades Sill diabase rock (the Palisades sill is the same intrusion you're looking at when crossing over the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey). That xenolith cooled over time and formed the new type of rock, trondhjemite. It is a unique chemical composition made from both diabase and xenolith. Trondhjemite is named after where it was first discovered, Trondheim, Norway.

The composition of the trondhjemite is actually slightly different at Graniteville Quarry Park. Benimoff says “I could have named it Staten Islandite...but I didn’t feel like cluttering up what’s out there already.”

My trip to the quarry was at the tail end of a long bike ride. I arrived there with only the knowledge I just wrote in the paragraphs above. I stood upon the magnificent formation and looked down at the mess someone left with a big tan pan full of crab legs. It’s nothing but a mundane forgotten park, but knowing the natural history of a place can make any place that much more interesting.

Another interesting place to check out the rock formations of the Palisades sill are looking out to the cliffs across the Spuyten Duyvil Creek in Inwood Hill Park. The big “C” painted over the dramatic cliff cheers on Columbia University athletes. Of course if you gawk out onto the other side of the Hudson you’ll catch the magnificent cliffs of the New Jersey Palisades and if you’re really feeling frisky, you can walk or bike over the George Washington Bridge into the

*the state of New Jersey and stand on the edge of them in Fort Lee Historic Park. If you ask me, the natural landscape of this part of New York and New Jersey *almost* rivals that of cities that are more known for “nature”. (San Francisco, Denver, Portland, etc)*



Garden

I claim ancestry to the remote mountain villages of Central Greece. My father, like his father, and grandfather before him all share a love of growing vegetables. With each generation the knowledge of how to harvest declines a bit, but I do my best to keep it alive.

Of course, there are limits to what I can accomplish in my small backyard compared to an expansive commercial farm, but I've taken up the spirit of urban farming over the years with green peppers, jalapenos, tomatoes, basil, oregano, cucumbers, corn, squash, spinach, kale, broccoli, lima beans, string beans, and mustard seed. Something about getting close to the earth and getting my hands covered in dirt that feels majorly important. Since I started maintaining a garden, I feel connected with my family's rural roots more than ever.

If you take a walk around the streets of Alphabet City today you will see a number of small gardens that fill the empty lots between the buildings. Community gardens gave something

times change, but many of Alphabet City's gardens remain thanks to protection from the city's parks department. Walking around this neighborhood at its best feels like a near perfect marriage of the built urban environment balanced with a that innate human need to maintain and grow vegetation.





Trees

About a year ago I stumbled upon a copy of “New York City Trees: A Field Guide to the Metropolitan Area” at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Center small souvenir section. I immediately picked it up. The book lists 130 different species of trees and where you can find them in New York City.

One of the highlights of the book is singling out notable trees in the city. The camperdown elm in Prospect Park is one of the most famous with its twisted and curvy branches. The first camperdown elm in the world was located at the Camperdown House in Dundee, Scotland. When a mutated Scots Elm branch was discovered to be growing there, it was grafted onto a normal Scots Elm producing a unique “weeping” look now known as the Scots Elm. All camperdown elms in the world can be traced back to the original including this one in Brooklyn.



I was also very intrigued when I learned that Kissena Park in Flushing was one of the best spots to see exoctic trees in New York City. In an unassuming field, a short distance from the tennis courts, was once the location of the grove of Samuel Bowne Parsons (of the same families for which Queens' Bowne Park and Parsons Boulevard are named after). Here you will find the Japanese zelkova and the star magnolia. The highlight for me was seeing what was once a row of several Katsura trees that have now merged into one row of trees, emerging from the ground like arms of some kind of giant squid.



Conclusion

*The naturalist Edward Abbey wrote in his famous memoir **Desert Solitaire** on the importance of getting visitors to National Parks out of their automobiles and experiencing nature the true way as he sees it, whether that be by foot, bicycle, horses, mules or anything else absent of a motor.*

“How to pry the tourists out of their automobiles, out of their back-breaking upholstered mechanized wheelchairs and onto their feet, onto the strange warmth and solidity of Mother Earth again? This is the problem which the Park Service should confront directly, not evasively, and which it cannot resolve by simply submitting and conforming to the automobile habit.”

For millions who live in cities, the reality of life without an automobile is part of daily life. Sure, most of those millions are spending time in controlled air-conditioned or heated environments, and a significant part of their transportation is likely by subway or bus. However, they are arguably more attuned to the natural environment than the typical suburban

resident. Suburbanites will tell you how much they prefer the suburbs because they “like grass” but what’s the point when all the grass that’s not on your own property is off limits, restricting you to sidewalks, if your suburb is even fortunate enough to have a sidewalk? City dwellers have to endure the natural elements of heat and cold on a daily basis, just to do their daily errands. We head out into the sun just to get to the corner store. A suburbanite will spend a brief ten seconds walking to their temperature controlled car so they can drive to Costco, try to park as close as possible to the door so they can avoid spending time outside.

City life may not be quite as “natural” as living, say, on a ranch or at the top of a remote mountain pass, but I think it does not get enough credit for its natural aspects. Human beings are a part of nature, and as much as we build up cities to feel inhospitable to the natural world, nature remains in the city, operating much the same as it would in a more rural setting. In many cases, a city dweller is spending a lot more time outside than a rural resident in this modern, automobile-driven, air conditioned world. Paying

just a bit of attention to it changes the way you look at the earth immensely. While maybe not quite what Edward Abbey imagined, the city offers a lot of easy options to get out of your car and see the world from outside the confines of four walls.



