

The urban forest and a happy nation

Sebastian Austin, January 2014



Sebastian received an Education Fund award as a contribution towards his college fees. Did you know, London is technically classed as a forest? This is a statement/fact that I will continuously bring out at any convenient moment to urbanites and countryside dwellers alike, regarding London's high percentage of tree cover. This is not only to justify my move after university from the heart of the green Lake District to the somewhat different surroundings of London, but also to show that the perception of London as being solely a harsh, urban setting is a fairly misjudged opinion. If we were to live in urban settings with no green spaces, research has found that human health would suffer, not just from the degenerate effects of the lack of fresh air and the mitigation of the harsh climate nature provides, but also the restorative effects to the human psyche green spaces bring. The restorative effects of green spaces have typically been explained from an evolutionary viewpoint. Throughout the two or three

million years of human evolution, natural environments have provided us with shelter and food. As a result, we have developed a partially genetic readiness to respond positively to living environments. This however, does not occur in man-made environments, which to people's hunter-gatherer minds would offer neither food nor shelter.

During the industrial revolution when urbanisation was expanding rapidly and the degenerate effects this brought on were being acknowledged, trees were recognised as vital to health and wellbeing and were a vital part in the plans of towns and cities. However, after the industrial revolution, interest in the urban forest started to dwindle, and urban parks and woodlands began to disappear.

There is now a growing recognition world-wide of the benefits of the urban forest. An example is the new garden bridge proposal put forward by actress and philanthropist Joanna Lumley, due to be finished in 2017.

Modern urban residential building design is often bleak. Research by *Coley et al 1997* found that nearby green space plays an important role in fostering social interaction. Social interaction in an urban green space led not only to stronger neighbourhood social ties, but also to a greater sense of safety.

Residents of inner-city public housing face enormous problems of poverty, discrimination and inadequate education. Research has shown some striking results as to how nature can help in dealing with these challenges. A study by *Kuo 2001* found that residents with nearby green spaces were less likely to procrastinate in dealing with major life issues and they felt more capable of dealing with life's challenges. This could be linked with the work of *Coley et al 1997* as the reason for the feeling of hopefulness could be due to the stronger neighbourhood ties that are created from the local green space.

For these reasons, I have always had a fascination with urban forests and parks, as they are the green spaces that affect the vast portion of the population with the smallest area of green space. When moving to London, I was fortunate enough to find work as a forester with the excellent forestry management company Bioregional Forestry, where I have been involved in an array of urban forests in and around London and have found that work as satisfying as I originally thought. It is very much a battle to find the middle ground between managing forests to an ecological prosperous state and keeping an area suitable for the general public.

I believe that green spaces have a great potential in bringing a sense of well-being to a large number of people in urban areas, who are suffering a sense of loneliness and isolation in this ever increasingly urbanised world, while also creating a more liveable and happy environment for future generations to enjoy.

References

Coley, R.L., Kuo, F.E. Sullivan, W.C. 1997. Where does community grow? The social context created by nature in urban public housing. *Environment and Behavior*, 29 (4), 468-494.

Kuo, F.E. 2001. Coping with poverty: Impacts of environment and attention in the inner city. *Environment and Behavior*, 33 (1), 5-34.