



URBAN POLLINATORS

LOOKING UP - MAY 2012

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

A FUTURE FOR OUR URBAN GREEN SPACES

WHY WE NEED TO ACT NOW

GREEN SPACE FOR ALL, AND ALL FOR GREEN SPACE

SIX PRINCIPLES AND 13 RECOMMENDATIONS

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson. This newsletter is part of a series of regular commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative; please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested.

This month we focus on the future of our urban green spaces, summarising a major report commissioned by Groundwork UK to mark their 30th anniversary.

GREY PLACES NEED GREEN SPACES: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN OUR NATION'S NATURAL ASSETS

After years of improvement and investment, our urban green spaces are threatened with a new spiral of decline.

We have been here before. At the end of the 20th century three decades of neglect led to national outrage, Parliamentary inquiries, task forces and government action.¹ This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Urban Green Spaces Task Force's report, a turning point in the fortunes of many of our public places.²

The achievements since then have been remarkable, but risk being short-lived. And the tests we face now are greater than those we overcame in the past. There is not only the immediate conundrum of how to keep green spaces and parks in good condition as public spending declines rapidly; there is also the longer term challenge of a changing climate.

Over the past decade ample evidence has been gathered of the social and economic benefits of our natural environment. We know that towns and cities with high quality green spaces attract investment and are seen as good places to work; we know well maintained parks encourage exercise; we know children socialise better where there are good places to play outdoors.

More recently, policymakers and academics have begun to research and articulate the overarching benefits provided by our green infrastructure – the network of formal and informal open spaces that underpins our economy and society by providing natural products, maintaining air and water quality, providing drainage and absorbing carbon.³

1 See, for example: Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee (1999) *Twentieth Report: Town and country parks*. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmselect/cmenvtra/477/47702.htm>

2 Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (2002) *Green Spaces, Better Places: Final report of the Urban Green Spaces Task Force*. London: DTLR.

3 Natural Economy Northwest (2008) *The Economic Value of Green Infrastructure*. www.naturaleconomynorthwest.co.uk

Yet government and businesses, more often than not, still fail to factor this 'natural capital' into financial decision-making, regarding our environment as a free good which, if it is anyone's responsibility, is someone else's. Green spaces are viewed as liabilities that attract the cost of maintenance, not as assets that must be looked after because they add and preserve value. This is despite the evidence and advice of government's own research and guidance.

The problem we face is not a lack of evidence: it is a lack of will to act effectively on the evidence before us. It is time to apply new thinking about the importance of our green spaces, because we cannot afford another quarter-century or more of decline while we wait until the public purse is full enough to mount a rescue mission. While public funding will always be stretched, we should expect intelligent decision-making. Our new report, *Grey places need green spaces – the case for investing in our nation's natural assets* seeks to set out a framework for such thinking and galvanise a new debate about what we as a nation really value and care about.⁴

The financial difficulties we face are real enough, but so are the challenges and opportunities of the future. In 1951, when rationing was still in force, the UK created National Parks, a National Health Service, and new towns with improved housing. The issue is as much one of priorities as of resources.

The need for action

The diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria was marked by the creation and improvement of public parks across Britain. It would be tragic if the diamond jubilee of Elizabeth II was marked by cuts and closures, but this is already starting to happen.

Some major cities, such as Liverpool, have withdrawn from the prestigious Green Flag award scheme because they do not think they can afford to meet the required standard. Others are disbanding park ranger teams, closing sports facilities and cafés, or introducing charges for services that were previously free.

The welter of reports issued at the turn of the millennium show us where this trend leads: to unsafe, neglected places that people choose to avoid, and the loss of the many benefits that come from cared-for green spaces.

But at the same time there is a new and dynamic surge of interest at community level in food growing, community gardening and the natural environment, and many new green spaces are being created. Public bodies need to ride this wave, not wait for it to break.

A shared responsibility

There is a growing public awareness that we all need to be stewards of our natural environment, preventing its degradation and ensuring it is passed on to our children and grandchildren in healthy condition.

Yet this awareness is not always mirrored in the actions of government and local authorities. The absence of any statutory duty to care for our parks and green spaces means they are often first in line for cost-cutting; and the effort

⁴ The full report is available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/94046477/Grey-places-need-green-spaces>

of ascribing a financial value to the benefits they provide often means that their owners act as if that value does not exist.

This flies in the face of common sense. The idea that publicly accessible green spaces are a shared resource, to be enjoyed and cared for, is an ancient one. It is captured in the concept of the commons, areas of land on which local residents enjoyed particular rights and privileges.

The remaining [historic commons](#) are now covered by legislation, the Commons Act 2006, that protects public access and reaffirms the responsibilities of care and maintenance. What is significant about the commons is not who owns the land – many are privately owned – but the continuing right of public enjoyment and duty of care. They provide a model for flexible partnerships of public, private and voluntary interests working for everyone's good.

Our report argues that this model of the commons should be applied to all publicly accessible parks and green spaces, enshrining in perpetuity their role and value as public goods, as well as the responsibilities of care that accompany public rights and privileges.

Such a framework allows a variety of approaches to ownership and management, from local trusts to traditional local authority management, but on a foundation of clear principles of stewardship that apply to owners, managers and users.

Green space for all, and all for green space

In recent years we have come to understand that our parks and green spaces are not just individual sites, but a network of 'green infrastructure' that supports the whole of our society and economy, just as the hard infrastructure of energy grids and transport networks enable society to function.

The 'ecosystem services' our green infrastructure provides are foundations of the life we enjoy, not optional extras. As the government's white paper, *The Natural Choice*, puts it: 'We should be thinking not of isolated spots of green on a map of England but of a thriving green network linking wildlife sites with farmland, forestry and urban parks and gardens across the country.'⁵

Similarly, there is a growing understanding that human beings naturally organise themselves in networks of shared interest and concern rather than in the rigid hierarchies and bureaucracies associated with the industrial age. Social media and the internet have demonstrated how these self-organising systems can emerge and grow exponentially. Movements like [Transition Towns](#) and initiatives like [Project Dirt](#) in London exemplify how such approaches are emerging in connection with green spaces and environmental projects.

Just as the commons encapsulates the idea of shared rights and responsibilities, the idea of networks stresses the importance of links and connections in guaranteeing the common good. The report argues that parks and green spaces should be managed in ways that maximise these connections, building on and drawing in the wider public, businesses and expert practitioners rather than concentrating power and decision-making in the hands of a few.

⁵ HM Government (2011) *The Natural Choice: Securing the value of nature*. London: The Stationery Office.

A networked approach will enable our green spaces to become more democratic, allowing all to participate according to their interests without working at cross-purposes. This will require a new role for central and local government as a leader and facilitator of national and local networks, not merely as legislator or funder of services.

A look at the fragmented nature of roles and responsibilities at present underlines the need for a new approach. While all have important parts to play, current pressures encourage organisations to avoid taking responsibility: there are hundreds of players concerned with our green spaces, but often little semblance of a team.

There is much that community effort or philanthropy can achieve, but it cannot simply fill gaps left by a retreating state. We need to find new ways of working together creatively to develop new approaches, building on the enthusiasm and imagination already evident on the ground.

Principles for the future

Six principles should underpin future thinking about green spaces in order to help us move towards models of shared rights and responsibilities, and a duty of stewardship that protects and enhances green spaces for future generations.

These are:

Future readiness. A changing and unpredictable climate and the continuing loss of wildlife and biodiversity have underlined the vital role our green infrastructure plays. We have to be far-sighted. Green spaces are not merely civic amenities: they are part of the fabric of ecosystem services that support human life, wellbeing and economic activity.

Equity: Our parks and green spaces are a shared resource. Even those that are in private ownership contribute to the common good. We need to invest in and manage them in ways that enhance these shared benefits. We must protect and increase public access, especially for those who face disadvantages, and reward owners who contribute to the common good through their land management.

Multifunctionality: Green spaces serve a wide variety of functions which cannot be divorced from each other. It is not just the green infrastructure that matters – it is the huge range of social goods that come with it. These need to be balanced in ways that minimise and resolve conflicts, recognising that different people value green space for different reasons.

Buck sharing: The biggest risk in a localist policy climate is that nobody takes responsibility. All – central government, local authorities, communities, and businesses – have a stake in the quality of our green spaces. A core principle of equity is that all who benefit should contribute in line with their resources, skills and abilities.

Enabling: The role of government, central or local, should be to encourage and reward responsible stewardship. This requires facilitation and catalytic investment, sharing knowledge and linking people with resources, and removing barriers to local action and involvement.

Involving: A defining principle of localism is ‘nothing about us without us’: that decisions should, as far as possible, be taken by the people they most affect. Green spaces are both a local and a shared resource. Decision-making should encourage local involvement, design and management in ways that complement an overarching understanding of the function spaces fulfil in the whole of our green infrastructure. Because all benefit, nobody should be excluded.

Making it happen: 13 recommendations

The report sets out 13 recommendations, ranging from national legislation to facilitating local action, that can help us towards a view of green spaces as a vital national asset and shared resource with enduring rights of public enjoyment. Their purpose is to help ensure decisions are made in line with the evidence rather than contrary to it. The recommendations apply particularly to the governance arrangements in force in England, but the overarching themes will be relevant to the other nations of the UK.

Recommendations to link communities, voluntary organisations and businesses:

1: Government, businesses and local authorities should work together to identify schemes that incentivise and reward public involvement and voluntary contributions, and test them as models for generating financial investment and volunteering in green spaces.

2: An independently-run national endowment fund should be created, financed by business and philanthropic contributions, to match fund community-led initiatives and community share issues in order to create new green spaces or upgrade existing ones.

3: The Treasury, pension funds, housing providers and local authorities should work alongside government and the accounting profession to develop social impact bonds as a model for investing in green infrastructure.

Recommendations for local government and public agencies:

4: The [community budgets](#) programme should be expanded to pilot 'total place' approaches to the natural environment, green spaces and climate change adaptation and mitigation. These pilots should also explore the scope for joining with health services to create 'community wellbeing budgets', bringing together green space management, health promotion and the treatment of conditions such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

5: England's [core cities](#) should draw up plans for 'green city deals' to fund investment in green infrastructure and link this directly with training and employment opportunities. Such deals should include the management of public green spaces, carbon reduction and enterprise creation.

6: Where [city deals](#) or community budgets are not available, local authorities (or Local Nature Partnerships) should draw up community green space charters to generate a shared local vision with other public services, landowners, businesses and community organisations.

7: Local authorities should be encouraged to pilot 'green improvement districts', bringing together partnerships of local stakeholders and residents to take concerted action where green spaces are neglected or failing.

8: Councils should set out and regularly update a strategic approach to green spaces in their Local Plans, planning positively for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure. Councils should ensure the value of green space as an appreciating asset is fully reflected in their accounting and financial planning.

9: Local government funding should be targeted to support staffing and maintenance rather than capital spending. Councils should use their resources to build networks of mutual support for parks and green spaces.

10: Commissioners of services should add value through procurement. Local authorities and other owners of public green spaces need to commission services that retain the multifunctional value of their assets rather than simply opting for the lowest cost.

Recommendations for central government:

11: A Parks and Green Spaces Act, based on the principles of the commons, should enshrine in law the responsibility of stewardship for all green spaces that are currently open to the public, whether or not they are publicly owned.

12: Central government departments and public agencies should ensure the value of the natural environment is reflected in planning and accounting, applying and building on guidance recently issued by HM Treasury.⁶

13: As well as valuing the 'natural capital' of our green spaces, it is essential that the social capital generated through them is adequately valued. Government should work with the Office for National Statistics and the accounting profession to develop robust indicators of social value that can be readily used by commissioners of services.

This is a brief summary of the full report, which can be downloaded or [read online here](#). Its purpose is not to be the last word about the future of green spaces, but to open up an important debate about our priorities and responsibilities that is too often pushed aside in the rush for short-term cost savings.

IN OTHER NEWS...

- Our work on the future of high streets and town centres continues: we have spoken at conferences in London and Glasgow (you can see video of the Glasgow event [here](#), and presentations on Slideshare [here](#) and [here](#)). On 25 May we're coordinating [High Street Camp](#), a unique 'unconference' bringing together some of the most inspiring and innovative thinkers on high streets in the UK, and will post material from that event on the [Revive Our Town Centres](#) forum. We have also written a [guest editorial](#) for the *Journal of Town and City Management*.
- Our latest policy research is with the think tank [Res Publica](#), on the theme of 'regeneration with a human face'. It will look especially at the role social landlords can play in building and strengthening community networks and acting as catalysts for local economic development.
- We've recently updated our work with the Bill Sargent Trust on how communities can benefit from the reuse of surplus military land, and the final report will be released shortly. Meanwhile here's a [brief presentation](#) that gives a two-minute outline of our research.

⁶ HM Treasury and Defra (2012) Accounting for environmental impacts: Supplementary Green Book guidance. London: HM Treasury.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We always welcome your comments and feedback. You can [contact us via our website](#) to have your say, update your details or suggest ideas for future newsletters and articles. You can also view details of recent projects [here](#), or read what people are saying about us [here](#).

And if you'd like us to work with you, help you with writing, research, facilitation or training, or speak at an event you're organising, please [contact us](#) or speak to Julian Dobson on 07545 874556.