

Large parks on the agenda in many places in the world

The 2nd to 4th of September Ekoparken Association and WWF, Sweden, had a conference take place at the Swedish Museum for Natural History. It dealt with large parks in large cities. Participants came from 27 countries and six continents. There is work going on for the creation or the further development of large parks in many countries, for example Iran, Germany, Colombia and the US, in or close to large cities. It isn't national parks, with wild, untouched nature far from urban areas. It isn't regular city parks, such as Washington Square in NY or the Hibiya Park in Tokyo. Instead, it is landscape parks – a relatively new concept – large, continuous green/partly blue areas in large cities and conurbations. They often include some residential areas, roads and rails. Fedenatur is an association that organizes several “peri-urban parks”, located in Barcelona, Milano, Lyon and other cities in southern Europe.

Urban green as a whole

This kind of park will house varied sorts of land, since the land in close proximity to large conurbations is strongly affected by human activities of many kinds. There can be some relatively untouched and wild parts. Other parts will be regular city parks for strolls and doves, and others still will be large English parks. But there may also be left over land. Peter Clark, the urban historian that spoke about the history of urban green at the conference, is now focusing his research on waste land, land left over.

Some of these areas may have a protection, others not, they just happen not to have been exploited. There is a collection of old royal hunting grounds, military exercising fields, disbanded industrial sites, waste dumps, swamps and hilly areas that make up the patch-work of large parks in cities around the globe. Add to those larger areas church-yards, villa gardens, play-grounds, boulevards etc. Large urban parks constitutes an effort to take one solid grip on the totality of urban green and to ask: what is its worth, although it is not “God's pure nature”? and is there any value in particular connected with large urban parks?

To continue Peter Clark's story: when cities still were rather small, one could easily walk out of the city to the nearest forest or pasture. But when cities grew the need for nature, fresh air, rest, berry picking and much more could not be met in this way. That is when – mid 19th century – ideas about creating green spaces in cities started to grow. In Stockholm the first public parks were royal parks that opened to the public mid 18th century (Kungsträdgården and Humlegården) under the pressure from enlightenment and popular demand. Then it took more than a hundred years for the city of Stockholm to create its own parks. In late 19th century two, rather small parks were created (Strömparterren and Berzeli park). The nearness of Djurgården, a former royal hunting ground, just outside the city, compensated for many years the lack of public parks in the city.

In Germany the concept “Volkspark” was born in opposition to “Volksgarten” and flourished in the beginning of the 20th century. It led to the creation of relatively large parks, less esthetically designed than the Volksgarten, based on the natural landscape. Most had room for a set of activities. One example is Rivierenhof in Antwerp. In such parks there is a mix of sport arenas, playgrounds, beautiful flower beds and fountains, amusement parks, a bit of an English park, race

courses for horses etc. Today Rivierenhof is remade into a nature park – activities are located to the periphery, nature occupying the larger part of the park in the middle.

Another great example of a “Volkspark” is Amsterdamse Bos, developed in the 1920s and 30’s by an army of 20.000 unemployed. Less valuable agricultural land was turned into a landscape park, with much nature, but also sports arenas – for example for rowing – and a goat farm.

Parks and their role for biodiversity

Thomas Elmqvist showed convincingly the very important role that large, continuous, green areas in cities have for biodiversity. The great UN project he and others participated in – the UN Ecosystem Millennium Assessment – demonstrated the importance of greenery in large cities, not only for life in the city, but also for biodiversity in general. Thomas cited Ban Ki-Mon, the secretary general of United Nations, having said: *“The principal message is that urban areas must offer better stewardship of the ecosystems on which they rely.”*

Thomas has shown that the costs of restoring waste land, patches of urban forests etc. into valuable green areas in terms of ecosystem services – as they are valued in different studies in different countries – is well spent since the value of ecosystem services is on average five times the costs.

Richard Murray demonstrated that land values around large cities vary a lot and that it is possible – even around New York – to find lots of land that is cheap enough to be profitable to invest in for the purpose of turning it into valuable urban green areas.

Mending damaged parks

Some sad examples of how, once, great parks have been neglected and successively been run down and partly exploited were also related at the conference. A large park in Brazzaville, the Republic of Congo, has been diminished and is now left in ruins, with little or no up-keep. The suggested way to save the remnants is to close it off by a large fence, which is contrary to make the park more accessible and used. In the Iranian part of Kurdistan in the city of Sanandaj a large park has been cut through by a highway, which limits access and deteriorates experiences of visiting the park.

In many parts of the world work is now undertaken to mend these damages. Ecoducts - wild life passages – are constructed in parks in order to help nature and strengthen biodiversity. Examples were given from Australia and the Netherlands.

Africa seemed to be behind when it comes to thinking and planning for large urban parks. The continent has great national parks, that people are proud of, but urban parks are treated less well. But even in Africa, there are positive examples. At the conference a large landscape park in Ibadan, Nigeria, was presented. It has been developed in an area that was formerly overgrown and inaccessible and is now a cherished spot for vacation. In Beira, the second largest city in Mozambique, a large city park with lots of various activities is now being planned along a river that runs through the city.

Human rights

Graham Fairclough stressed that parks and greenery should be seen as a natural component of cities instead of fragments that are added as dressing. Experiencing the landscape one lives in, even in a city, is so important for the identity of people, that it must be seen as an important ingredient of human rights for people to have influence over the development and changes of this landscape. In the words of the Florence Charter, the European landscape convention, this is so because “landscape is an area as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action interaction of natural and human factors”. Therefore, large urban parks are important as reminders of this landscape.

Comparative analysis

During the conference some 20 parks were presented. The presentations provide a rich diversity of old English parks in Wales, large, wild areas outside of Moscow (the 116 square kilometer large Losinj Ostrov national park), series of planned parks in the US and bold initiatives in Latin America like Mexico City.

Another set of presentations dealt with various issues connected with large urban parks. Some 20 papers dealt with the design of large urban parks, biodiversity and how it can be handled, ecosystem services, city planning and the history of specific large urban parks. This gave examples of another large set of parks from all over the world.

A special contribution was Julia Czerniak’s account of the many large urban parks designs that are now under way or have been implemented in recent years. This ranged from Fresh Kills, south of Manhattan, to Singapore Gardens by the bay and Qian Hai Water City, China.

Richard Forman concluded the conference by giving an overview of research pertinent to large urban parks from not only an ecological point of view but also from a sociological and demographic point of view. Where will the next billion people on earth live, he asked? His answer relates to the role and function of large urban parks – large patches of green, in Forman terminology. It is not a simple answer, but instead one that points out local prerequisites and an understanding of how green spaces of all sizes interact with each other. Urban ecology is the knowledge of how this is happening.

Next step

An evening session gathered a group of 25 participants to discuss how to proceed. The group consisted of people from 12 countries, all agreeing that further action is needed to advance the understanding of the role of large parks in urban ecology and city life. Anne Steidle came up with an offer from the newly created organization World Urban Parks that a section for large urban parks would be welcomed. This is, therefore, the track that is being pursued at the moment.

Richard Murray

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