

A WALK IN THE PARK

As Londoners prepare to elect a new Mayor, the state of the city's natural environment is high on the agenda. **Chris Fitch** looks at whether the capital has a green future, and what it might look like

Data

Tired of London, tired of life, as Dr Johnson so neatly put it. However, his further claim that 'there is in London all that life can afford' has likely raised many an eyebrow over the intervening years, not least by the millions who flocked to the surrounding suburbs following the birth of the railways, escaping the fabled dirt, grime and squalor of the city. While undoubtedly a place where culture, society and business thrive, London has never epitomised a popular vision of an ecological hotspot.

Now the 2016 Mayoral election looms, and the environment - from air pollution to green spaces to cycle lanes to solar energy - is very much on the agenda. This can be partially attributed to a 21st century world where 'liveability' and 'green cities' are increasingly en vogue, moving from mere buzzwords to genuine concrete policies. However, the city's 8.6 million residents have also spent the past four years reading headlines about how many thousands of Londoners die prematurely due to air pollution every year, that the city's children are spending less and less time outdoors, and that many people are being increasingly priced out of the tree-lined residential streets found in the capital's more affluent boroughs.

This election asks some fundamentally big questions: does London have a green future? If yes, what might that look like? Can this truly global city, like its contemporaries around the world, evolve and re-embrace its green-ness, its naturalness, its wildness?

POLITICAL AGENDA

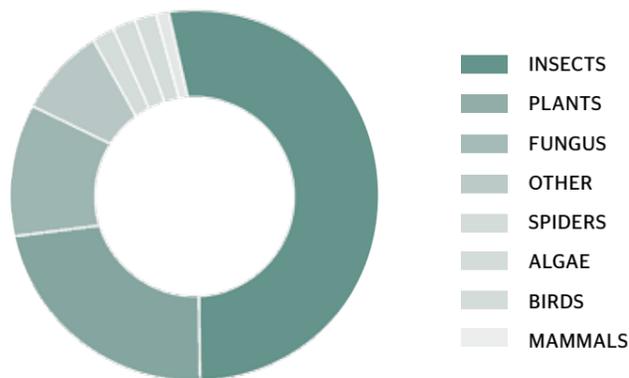
'It's one of the first times that you have such green competition at an election, which is really wonderful,' observes Frieda Metternich, a policy advisor for the London-based think tank Green Alliance. As she notes, all major candidates for the election have made varying bold promises related to improving the city's natural environment, with near universal agreement on cleaning air, improving solar capacity, and generally encouraging Londoners - especially children - to spend more time outdoors. She believes that there has been a noticeable shift following the COP21 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris last year. 'There is momentum around climate, greening, and living in sustainable cities,' she says.

Despite the existing pledges, Metternich and her colleagues are challenging candidates to dream bigger. She is lead author of a report entitled Greener London, co-published by a consortium of environmental organisations (Green Alliance, Greenpeace, RSPB, WWF, National Trust, CPRE, Friends of the Earth, London Wildlife Trust and Campaign for Better Transport) which sets out suggested policy decisions that could be reasonably undertaken over the next four years and would make a significant difference to London's environment.

'Our starting point was, how do we make a better, healthier, cleaner and fairer city?' explains Metternich. 'This is not some utopian London that is not actually deliverable - it's something concrete that the next Mayor can do if he or she wants to. The ideas are feasible, yet ambitious.'

These proposals include a tenfold increase in the city's solar capacity, a requirement for green rooftops on new commercial developments, and quality green spaces to be

GROUP BREAKDOWN OF LONDON'S RECORDED WILDLIFE (JAN 2016)



Greenspace Information for Greater London CIC, 2016. www.gigl.org.uk

THE GREEN BELT

Contemporary discussions regarding London's greenery are arguably a perfectly natural 21st century extension of several centuries worth of similar debate, the result of which is the city's existing eight Royal Parks and the perpetually divisive green belt.

Monarchs began flirting with the idea of enclosing green spaces within and around London in the 15th and 16th centuries, beginning with Greenwich Park in 1433. Charles II encouraged the redesign of several parks during the 1660s, adding various walkways and water features in order to create something akin to what we might recognise today. Throughout the 19th century, the parks were gradually opened for public usage, as laid out by the Crown Lands Acts.

Despite years of debate, it wasn't until 1938 that the Green Belt Act empowered local authorities to buy land for preservation. Although since followed by subsequent revisions, this remains the pivotal legislation which directs green belt policy. It now encompasses 484,173ha, 35,000 of which lie within the control of the Greater London Authority.

introduced to 100 social housing estates by 2020. However, it leads with proposals to phase out diesel-powered black taxis and buses by 2020 and 2025 respectively, to expand the city's Ultra Low Emission Zone (an area in the city's centre where vehicles have to meet certain exhaust emission standards or pay a fee to travel through), and to set up a fund specifically devoted to tackling air pollution around London's schools.

Metternich explains how air pollution is one of the key reasons preventing London from scoring highly whenever cities around the world are ranked by sustainability or liveability. An estimated 9,400 Londoners died prematurely from air pollutants in 2010, principally from exposure to nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and fine PM2.5 particles, with commercial hotspots such as Oxford Street and Putney High Street consistently breaching their annual EU limits for NO₂ within the first few days of January.

URBAN JUNGLE

One radical idea for significantly improving the city that has gained a lot of traction - and one that was strongly endorsed by all four Mayoral candidates at the Greener London electoral hustings hosted by Green Alliance in March - is Daniel Raven-Ellison's proposal to make London into the world's first National Park City (see *Opinions*, October 2015). 'We want to make London a far greener city, both in terms of it being physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually and technologically greener, and in the process making people and wildlife better off,' enthuses Raven-Ellison. 'This is about inviting life into the city.'

The idea he proposes - which is supported by over 100 social and environmental organisations and which received a vote of confidence from the London Assembly last year - goes far beyond making isolated changes to parts of London's urban landscape. Instead, it views the entire city - all 1,572km² of it - as a living, breathing organism.

'The focus on the National Park City is around the things individual people can do that can improve their lives, or the lives of others, including wildlife,' explains Raven-Ellison. 'We're not coming from a top-down position saying, "What can government, or business, or the council do to make your park better?" We're asking what are the things that *you* can do to have a better experience? That's the big thing.'

The working definition for a National Park City labels it as a 'large urban area that is managed and semi-protected through both formal and informal means to enhance the natural capital of its living landscape.' This includes 'the widespread and significant commitment of residents, visitors and decision-makers to allow natural processes to provide a foundation for a better quality of life for wildlife and people.'

At its heart it's an encouragement for all residents of London's capital to embrace opportunities for ecological engagement by any means, large or small, by scaling up existing practices across the city.

'The really exciting thing is creating an atmosphere where millions of people make everyday decisions in their gardens, and in their lives, and as parents, that they'll want to do because of a cultural change that will make the city better in a wide range of ways,' continues Raven-Ellison. 'That can be as small as someone deciding they're going to, as a family, put a bird box in their wall. Or it could be as big as a major property developer saying, "We're going to be the first property developer to install swift bricks, hedgehog holes, and bug hotels in every single building."'

His proposal explains how the official declaration of London as the world's first National Park City would lead to the creation of the National Park City Partnership (NPCP), an organisation with no formal planning powers, but with the responsibility to inspire and educate parties across the city in order to bring the National Park City idea to life. Drawing parallels with Tech City in East London, Raven-Ellison envisages the NPCP as a unifying force to find and promote best practice in creating a wilder London more suited to outdoor recreation, urban exploration and guerrilla gardening.

Specific initial goals include: increasing the city's physical greenery from 47 per cent to 51 per cent; consistently improving London's air quality, water quality and biodiversity, as well as inspiring new business activities and the construction of affordable green homes; ensuring 100 per cent of Londoners have 'free and easy access to high-quality green space', as well as aiming to 'connect 100 per cent of London's children to nature'.

'Clearly 100 per cent is quite a challenging target,' admits Raven-Ellison, a former geography teacher. 'The point is that it's unacceptable to think that anyone isn't

LONDON



8.6
MILLION
PEOPLE

8.3
MILLION
TREES

POLLUTION



8.3m
TREES
provide £95m
worth of air
filtration

9,400
PEOPLE
DIED from
air pollutants
in 2010

WILDLIFE



13,000
SPECIES OF WILDLIFE

Data

connected. Every nursery, every primary school and every secondary school should have policies in place to make sure that outdoor learning is taking place across the curriculum. We need a shift in culture where it becomes seen as neglectful to have your children inside.'

GREEN BENEFITS

Feedback appears to suggest overwhelming support for the idea, according to an in-depth survey organised by Edward Truch, a director of the National Park Research Centre at Lancaster University. 'We asked a number of quantitative questions around people's understanding of how green London is and also the extent to which they would support all sorts of initiatives, including the formation of the National Park City, having explained to them what the concept is,' says Truch. 'To our amazement, in excess of 85 per cent of the general population of London feel that it's a very worthwhile initiative and should be carried through.'

Furthermore, 83 per cent thought making London a National Park City would improve Londoners' health, 85 per cent felt it would make it a better place to live and visit, while 88 per cent thought it would help protect and promote parks.

The argument that creating the London National Park City would improve Londoners' prosperity also has support from the UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP). 'One of our missions is to define what prosperity can mean for people and how it can be achieved,' explains Konrad Miciukiewicz, a research associate at the IGP. 'We go beyond the economic context of prosperity towards broader definitions that incorporate cultural and environmental dimensions and other issues like health and diversity.'

The IGP concluded that the London National Park City would 'enhance well-being, sustainability and prosperity in the metropolitan environment' as a result of the benefits provided in terms of health, environmental sustainability, diversity, social inclusion, and political empowerment. 'Our key idea was to think about the vision of a National Park that would recognise that the natural environment and the built environment are weaved and work together,' says Miciukiewicz. 'While most National Parks are quite top-down governance structures, we were working towards a concept of a National Park that would be more open to bottom-up initiatives.'

Therefore, the IGP proposed a number of measures including a Greater London National Park City charter, a Natural Capital Fund to act as a financial arm of the National Park City, and a Mobile Green Hub to educate Londoners about the work of the Park. 'We tried to build a positive social and cultural case for this,' says Miciukiewicz. 'Our idea was to imagine something that would open up channels of human creativity and that would bring different communities together to do something in nature, for nature and to benefit from that in different sorts of ways.'

JUMPING HURDLES

With such overwhelming support for the National Park City, what opposition has there been to the idea? Possibly the key question relates to who actually has the authority (or is willing to take the responsibility) to give an official stamp to the idea. The outgoing Mayor, Boris Johnson, reportedly responded to the initial petition for the scheme by saying that he 'does not have powers to create a new class of urban National Park.'

Daniel Raven-Ellison clearly believes otherwise. 'I replied to Boris saying, actually you *do* have the authority,' he says. 'There's a good question about what is the threshold that would be needed to democratically show, through our political system, support for London to be a National Park City. Having the support of the Mayor of London and of councillors from two thirds of the wards which make up London's local authorities would be more than reasonable.'

Indeed, borough councillors across the city have been gradually pledging their personal support towards the idea, and at the time of going to print, councillors from 180 out of London's 654 wards which make up London's 27 local authorities had given the green light to the initiative.

Then there's the wider, national picture. Would London as a National Park City diminish the status of the UK's existing 15 National Parks? Not according to Rob Bushby, from the John Muir Trust, which seeks to conserve, protect, and engage people in wild places across the country. 'John Muir wasn't the founder of the first National Parks, but he politicised it and was a big influence on the National Park service being created, so he is considered to be the founding father for them,' explains Bushby. 'The National Park

London totals 1,572km² of land. In 'green terms' that includes:

38 million GARDENS 

30,000 ALLOTMENTS 

3,000 PARKS 

300 FARMS 

142 NATURE RESERVES 

37 SITES OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST 

City idea very much resonates with that sense of connecting with people where they're at, and promoting the values of wildness and connecting with nature.'

One famous Muir quote reads: 'Everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play and pray, where nature heals and gives strength to body and soul alike.' In short, he was a man who felt that wildness and conservation were for all, not just the few who happen to live in sufficiently rural parts of the world.

'He was certainly a populist in saying that wider society - everybody - should engage with wild places and become active conservationists, as he described it,' continues Bushby. 'To interpret that ethos, that legacy of John Muir in this sort of context in 2016, I think personally that's really exciting.'

It's a sentiment echoed by Paul Hamblin, Executive Director of National Parks England. 'National Parks is an internationally recognised brand that successfully enhances wildlife, the wellbeing of people, and demonstrates the practical application of sustainable development,' he explains. 'We see a National Park City as a new concept, but one that can usefully draw on the underlying principles for National Parks.'

He even argues that a National Park City could potentially have positive impacts for the existing Parks, highlighting one of their traditional purposes 'to increase people's understanding of the special qualities of these places'.

'An important role of any National Park City,' he adds, 'should also include showcasing the beauty that exists and is available to all its residents in our existing National Parks. A National Park City has the potential to inspire millions of people to better understand the natural world around them.'

URBAN DESIGN

Of course, preserving London's greenery is a question which has been asked for over a century, and the city was pioneering in its embracing of the Royal Parks and the green belt many decades before congestion charging or cycle superhighways were ever conceived. 'It's not like we are taking an empty London and asking "How do we make it green?"' says the Green Alliance's Frieda Metternich. 'We very much work from what we have right now, and where we can be in 2020.'

So where, potentially, could we be in 2020? Students from the London College of Communication (LCC), part of the University of the Arts London, have drawn upon the National Park City to try and envisage innovative natural ideas for the city, including built environment designs such as algae roundabouts, bird habitats built into lampposts, and roof gardens, as well as more technological innovations such as creating a map of the city's wild swimming locations, or a smartphone app featuring popular natural walks.

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'Algae roundabouts - that's a fantastic idea,' enthuses Sarah Temple, a course leader at the LCC. 'They're luminous, so at night they create these fantastic moving spaces in the centre of very grey roundabouts. And they're actually absorbing pollution so they have fantastically positive effects. It's about mobilising people to change and do things differently, not necessarily about the green space itself. It's about people changing their habits, changing their lifestyle, changing their values.'

One other issue that has united this year's Mayoral candidates - certainly at time of going to print - is a steadfast refusal to consider building on London's green belt. While this has invited criticism from those keen for extra land to be given over for development as a potential way of alleviating the city's housing problems, it may play well with others increasingly concerned by the reduction in green spaces across the city as a whole - the opposite of the National Park City plan to make the city more 'physically green'.

LOST GREEN

Green Alliance claims that budget cuts to local council spending have led to reduced investment on open spaces, and forced the development of London's formerly green land. Between 2009 and 2012, 215.5 hectares of 'green, open land were lost', a space the Alliance

PARKS



215.5ha

OF GREEN, OPEN LAND was lost between 2009-2012 - equivalent to Hyde Park and Battersea Park combined

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'There is currently a massive financial crisis for London's parks,' says the Alliance's Frieda Metternich. 'Quite often at the moment the grass is maintained but all the other bits aren't. It's something people don't really see immediately, but local authorities have no money at all to properly care for parks anymore.'

Info

URBAN
FARMING

Of course, the outdoors is useful for more than just being present in, and the increasing worldwide phenomenon of urban farming is starting to carve out a niche in London.

The practice gives people a chance to engage with nature, and their local community, in a way which has rarely been considered in previous decades.

'We are very lucky in London to have so much green space,' insists Ian Solomon-Kawall, co-founder of May Project Gardens, a project in Merton that aims to bring communities closer together through ecological and ethical activities. He practices what he preaches, turning his home into a model for sustainability, and, crucially, an educational tool for the local community, where young people can learn about permaculture, nutrition, and biodiversity, as well as picking up numerous practical skills.

Solomon-Kawall emphasises the need to promote the ways in which many other people are making productive, positive, and efficient usage of the city's available land. 'Their voices are not being heard,' he argues. 'They're not part of the conversation. This is what we wanted to highlight.' He uses music and participatory arts, such as the Hip Hop Garden, to engage young people in nature and help them share their experiences. With the project preparing to expand onto new sites in the borough, London becoming a National Park City could help them reintroduce urban farming to the Greater London land area, and help further their social agenda.



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SOCIAL ENDEAVOUR

As Daniel Raven-Ellison explains, the National City Park idea is by no means just an entirely environmental movement. 'The majority of people who are involved come from more of a social position actually,' he explains. 'It's not being pushed just from a conservation agenda, which I think is one of its strengths. A lot of initiatives are just about nature, they win over a niche of people who really like wildlife, and then they exclude or alienate another group of people.'

Unfortunately, it is those least financially able to access green spaces who are suffering the most, increasing a trend showing that it is poorer children, as well as those from black and minority ethnic groups, who are spending less and less time in London's outdoor spaces. 'The poorest populations in London don't have access to these high quality green spaces,' points out Metternich.

Therefore, the National Park City aspires to reduce social divides by ensuring that green spaces are available to all, and that the capital's poorest communities aren't excluded from nature.

One organisation who could potentially guide the way is the Black Environment Network (BEN), which works to 'enable full ethnic participation in the built and natural environment', highlighting the ways in which ethnic minorities can be most deprived of a connection to the natural environment. BEN encourages the involvement of disadvantaged ethnic minority communities in environmental participation, hoping to ensure that they can also enjoy the benefits of green spaces just as much as those living in leafier pastures.

'Many of the most disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minorities, are on council estates in the cities,' says Judy Ling Wong, Honorary President of BEN. 'The National Park City intends to pay attention to every bit of space, and continually ratchet it up so that more and more the whole city is in the presence of nature. Many council estates actually have more green space than all the local parks and gardens, but they're of the lowest quality. There's acres and acres and they're right outside the most disadvantaged groups' windows. Imagine what we can do with that, by changing the atmosphere, getting social landlords to be inspired by this whole idea of creating green space that allows people to have true contact with wild nature.'

Ling Wong also stresses the 'terrific richness and passion' that could be brought to the city's natural environment by migrant communities.

VALUE FOR MONEY

Wealth has always been at the heart of London, from the historic Bank of England, to the gleaming towers of Canary Wharf, and questions have understandably been asked about the cost of implementing such ideas as those encouraged by Raven-Ellison.

The capital benefits of London's existing greenery - known as ecosystems services valuation - have begun to be quantified by global design, engineering and environmental company AECOM. It calculates London's 8.3 million trees to be providing £95 million worth of air filtration every year in terms of health costs avoided. They also give the localised example of £140,500 worth of climate regulatory services being provided by Tottenham Cemetery every year through carbon sequestration, a figure that could reach £2 billion across the capital.

'We were certainly fairly conservative in the valuations that we did,' explains Ben Smith, AECOM Director of Sustainable Development in Europe, Middle East, Africa and India. While he acknowledges the continued public debate about the pros and cons of ecosystem services valuations in general, he emphasises the awareness which research such as this can bring to discussions regarding green urbanism. 'For the general public, it might be an interesting way of thinking about values,' he says. 'They catch people off guard and make them ask more questions, which is exactly what we wanted to happen.'

'It changes your outlook on parks that you know and love,' he continues. 'If I think of Clapham Common, I always remember playing football there, which has some value to me. But I don't necessarily think about it as a place which helps to attenuate rainwater and stop downstream flooding somewhere else. I don't necessarily think of it as a place where there's lots of trees sequestering carbon and helping air quality from the roads that are around the park. I don't think individuals tend to think very broadly about the services that green space provides.'

NEW CHAPTERS

Of all the complaints that the new London Mayor could potentially have when they take the reins of City Hall in May, a lack of ideas regarding how to improve London's environmental sustainability, prosperity, wildness, and general green credentials surely can't be among them.

Reflective of how these issues have risen up the city's political agenda, thousands of people and hundreds of organisations are now actively engaged in hands-on ways to improve the city, a grass-roots movement providing an opportunity for an ambitious Mayor to launch a new chapter in the city's illustrious green history.

'I think we can have a greener London,' predicts Frieda Metternich. 'It's very much possible, and I'm actually very confident that this is will be high on the priority list for the next Mayor - that something will be delivered.'

THE GLOBAL
VIEW

While the 'National Park City' name itself may be a world first, the idea of merging National Parks with cities is one that has previously been implemented elsewhere around the world. However, Daniel Raven-Ellison suggests these often try to fit one inside the other, as opposed to brand the city itself as a new type of National Park.

'In Stockholm,' he explains, 'there's an urban National Park, but it's a National Park within the city area. In Toronto there's Rouge National Park, which is a National Park on the outside of an urban area. And the mall in Washington DC - it's run by the National Park service, but it's in Washington. So, there are National Parks around the world that have urban relationships. The difference with this is that it will cover the entire city and be everything.'

Few cities have embraced the green concept more than Singapore though, which brands itself as the 'City in a Garden'. Over decades, it has developed a network of parks and nature reserves to enhance biodiversity and create spaces for recreation.

'It has a National Park service that looks after a lot of its green spaces,' says Raven-Ellison. 'While that may inspire lots of people who have their private spaces, there's a division between the public and private space. So, whether you're looking at flooding or climate change, strategically it has been thought about for the public space, but not the private space. To miss out a third of the land, it's a noticeable chunk.'