

**CHICAGO WILDERNESS:
FLAGSHIP OF THE URBAN BIODIVERSITY MOVEMENT**

Remarks to Chicago Wilderness Tenth Anniversary

by

Rutherford H. Platt^{*}
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

May 17, 2006

It is a great honor and delight for me to be invited back to Chicago to share in the Tenth Anniversary of the Chicago Wilderness, the world's flagship urban biodiversity collaboration and unique regional voice for greener, more ecological cities and suburbs.

I feel a bit like the Prodigal Son – having left here in 1972 to pursue an academic career at the University of Massachusetts. Although I grew up in New York City, my professional home base was and still is Chicago. I first came here in 1964 as a student in the University of Chicago Law School. After that, I crossed the Midway to pursue a Ph.D. in the Department of Geography under a federal Urban Studies Fellowship. A year or so later, Gunnar Peterson, then the Executive Director of Open Lands Project, hired me as staff attorney at OLP under a grant from Gaylord Donnelley.

My real world job thus stimulated my doctoral research, and vice versa, and I managed somehow to produce a book for Open Lands and a thesis for the Geography Department, both concerned with greenspace preservation in the Chicago area. Moreover, the chance to work with, and learn from, people like Gunnar and Betty Peterson, Lee Botts, George Overton, Bill Beecher, Charles Olmsted, Jim and Mary Lou Marzuki in Park Forest, the Nadelhoffers in Naperville, and so many others, was a life-changing experience which I have never outgrown.

In 1972, my wife and I, with our two young children, moved to Northampton, Massachusetts where I started my career at UMass Amherst. But the withdrawal from

^{*} Dr. Platt is a professor of geography and planning law at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He directs the Ecological Cities Project, a program of research, teaching, and outreach: www.ecologicalcities.org. Before moving to Massachusetts, he served as Staff Attorney at the Openlands Project in Chicago from 1968 until 1972.

the Chicago Open Lands scene was traumatic for a while: Western Massachusetts was too bucolic, too pretty, too boring—with no “airports in the lake” or Crosstown Expressways to fight, or Thorn Creek Woods to be saved. I even called George Overton to see if the law job he had once offered me was still available. (It wasn’t).

Fast forward: In 1990, I collaborated with Paul Heltne and others to hold a conference at the Chicago Academy of Sciences in Lincoln Park on the topic of “Sustainable Cities: Restoring and Preserving Urban Biodiversity.” That led to an edited collection of essays under the title The Ecological City published by the University of Massachusetts Press in 1994.

A few years after that, I started the Ecological Cities Project as a program of “research, teaching, and outreach” based at my university. We were fortunate to attract a number of national leaders, including my old friend Jerry Adelmann, to lend their names to the steering committee. One outgrowth of the Ecological Cities Project is a new book: The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21st Century City to be published this fall by the University of Massachusetts Press and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. The book and its companion DVD film are based a conference we held in New York in 2002 which celebrated the work of the late William H. Whyte, and sampled new ways of greening cities in progress today around the country.

Returning to Chicago Wilderness—with some 190 public and private sector member organizations, your magazine, your Biodiversity Atlas and restoration program, your environmental education programs, and your research, restoration, and outreach initiatives, this is an amazing and unique enterprise. The model you have created begs to be replicated in other large urban regions. However, the only one I am aware of at this time is Houston Wilderness. (At my suggestion, Carol Fialkowski was invited to New York to brief a group of urban environmentalists there on how your network operates. After lengthy discussion, they formed “The Nature Network” which is now under development.)

In fact, the *modus operandi* of Chicago Wilderness may not so easily be transplanted outside its home territory. It draws on and reflects some of the special

cultural traditions of the upper Midwest and of Chicago in particular. Let me briefly identify three of these traditions from which Chicago Wilderness emerged:

1. Regionalism— The 1909 Burnham and Bennett “Plan of Chicago” famously reflected and reinforced a growing sense of the Chicago Area as embracing the City along with its suburbs and nearby farm lands as a planning and perceptual “region.” The Cook County Forest Preserve District was established in 1914 as a direct result of the Burnham Plan and a campaign of civic support for forest preserves spearheaded by Dwight H. Perkins. The Cook County FPD effectuated a regional approach to conservation of forests and greenspaces that has continued with counterpart districts in other Illinois counties of the Chicago region. Regionalism has also long been embodied in such institutions as the Metropolitan Sanitary District (now the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District), the Chicago Regional Planning Commission and its successor, the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, Chicago Metropolis 2020, Openlands Project, and over the past decade, Chicago Wilderness.

Tony Hiss, in his recent book on the New York region *H2O: Highlands to Ocean*, characterizes a region as the “middle ground, a missing link that reflects both local actions and global consequences. Living and cooperating regionally makes it possible to think globally and act locally.”¹ Similarly, the National Research Council Board on Sustainable Development in its 1999 report stated that: “The quest for sustainability at the regional scale is rich in the variety of institutions, values, and kinds of environmental and social systems it engages. . . . Many of the greatest challenges facing a sustainability transition occur at the regional scale.”²

The Chicago area has a powerful regional sense of place. One can stand at Buckingham Fountain (or the shining new “Bean” in Millennium Park) and imagine the region as a highly diverse but unified space radiating outward through the Loop, the gentrified near-downtown neighborhoods, the troubled West and South Sides, the Calumet and Southwest industrial corridor, the older railroad suburbs, the new “edge cities” such as Naperville, the raw subdivisions and residual farm villages of Will, Kane,

¹ Tony Hiss and Christopher Meier, *H2O: Highlands to Ocean*. Morristown, NJ: Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, 2004, p. 30

² NRC Board on Sustainable Development, *Our Common Journey: Transition Toward Sustainability*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999, pp. 154-155.

and McHenry Counties, along with nearby parts of Indiana and Wisconsin—in short the territory of Chicago Wilderness. This geographic “diversity within unity” has been splendidly portrayed by Terry Evans in her book Revealing Chicago: An Aerial Portrait³ and the exhibit of some of her photographs in Millennium Park last year.

2. “Urbs in Horto” — Leif Ericson allegedly chose the name “Greenland” to lure settlers to that icebound and forbidding land. Perhaps with similar motives, Chicago’s founders adopted the motto “Urbs in Horto” (“city in a garden”) which is inscribed on the city’s seal of 1837. Chicago’s site on a swampy, glacial plain bordering Lake Michigan actually had little to recommend it geographically except for its location straddling the divide between the Great Lakes and Mississippi River watersheds. But whether boosterism or wishful thinking, the motto came to represent Chicago’s tradition of city and nature intertwined. Frederic Law Olmsted helped realize this vision in his landscape design for the 1893 Columbian Exposition, whose imprint is still enjoyable today at Wooded Isle in Jackson Park. Jens Jenson furthered the tradition in his many landscape projects for the Chicago Park District, particularly his celebrated plantings in the Garfield Park Conservatory.

Today, Chicago’s “Urbs in Horto” tradition continues with Mayor Daley’s City Hall Green Roof, the Chicago Green Technology Center, the Chicago Park District, and the many initiatives overseen by the city’s Department of the Environment. Outside the city, key member institutions of Chicago Wilderness—including the Morton Arboretum, the Brookfield Zoo, the Illinois Nature Conservancy, Openlands Project, and this Museum—have long helped to propagate the “urbs in hortus” tradition to the entire region. This role is now shared and strengthened by Chicago Wilderness itself – the whole being much more than the sum of the parts...

3. Land Advocacy — My first book “Open Land in Urban Illinois”⁴ documented how open land preservation relies on the persistence and passion of key individuals who I referred to as “citizen advocates.” Think of: Dorothy Buell, Paul Douglas, and Sylvia Troy—Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore; May Watts—the Illinois Prairie Path; Gunnar

³ Terry Evans, Revealing Chicago: An Aerial Portrait. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2005.

⁴ R. H. Platt, Open Land in Urban Illinois: Roles of the Citizen Advocate. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971.

Peterson—Goose Lake Prairie and the I&M Canal; Mary Lou Marzuki and Nancy McCrohon—Thorn Creek Woods; Lee Botts—Lake Michigan Federation; Jerry Adelman—Upper Illinois Valley Heritage Corridor and much else; and Marian Burns—the Southeast Environmental Task Force which is spearheading the revitalization of the Calumet region.

You are welcome to add your own favorite examples to the list. And notice that not one of these projects is named after its chief advocate(s). The ability to subsume oneself into a collaborative effort where the credit is widely shared is fundamental to open space advocacy—Chicago-style!

Let me finally share some thoughts about the future role of Chicago Wilderness itself. Clearly, despite all the open lands and “smart growth” efforts of recent decades, this region continues to sprawl relentlessly. The rate of land consumption is far higher than regional population growth: according to the 1998 Openlands Project report Under Pressure: Land Consumption in the Chicago Region, by 2020 the Greater Chicago region will experience population growth of 25 percent but a likely 55 percent increase in developed land. (While recent census data indicates the rate of population growth is slowing, the rate of sprawl shows no sign of relenting.)

Moreover, Chicago and its region are going through dramatic structural and socioeconomic change. Like the central city, much of the region is increasingly multi-cultural and multi-generational with all the opportunities and challenges which that represents. Aging infrastructure of all kinds needs to be repaired and updated, as witness the current reconstruction of the Dan Ryan. Housing costs are astronomic, often requiring at least two pay checks to support a mortgage on a modest home at the urban fringe. And much new residential construction consists of oversized pseudo-mansions, often within gated communities that isolate their residents, literally and perceptually, from participation in the larger community. The population of the Chicago region, as in other large metro areas, is stressed out in many ways: shortage of time, money, nervous energy, lack of exercise, family issues—all compounded by daily immersion in a metropolitan environment of visual dreariness, blight, noise, crowding, pollution, and absence of nature.

Beginning in the 1920s, with the widespread availability of motor cars, the white middle class began to escape from urban pressures by driving to “the country.” The 1962 Report of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission identified “driving for pleasure” as the most popular form of “outdoor recreation.” Today, the option of escaping to “the country” for most people is increasingly infeasible. Metro areas like Chicago are too large, traffic too intense, costs too high, and once-rustic destinations are beginning to look like what you’re trying to escape from.

Moral of the story: Olmsted was right. He and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park in the 1850s as an accessible “White Mountains” for the laboring class of New York, or, to use the Victorian phrase, as their “green lungs.” Similarly Burnham and Jenson planned the Chicago parks for the carless masses. In the 21st Century the “carless masses” have become the “carbound masses.” The outward-bound, macho nameplates of SUVs—Explorer, Navigator, Sierra, Denali—mock the reality that they spend much of their time stuck in traffic going nowhere at considerable personal and environmental cost.

But there is much more at stake here than simply how long it takes to get anywhere within or outside our metropolitan regions. A half century ago, the urban historian Lewis Mumford warned that: “[The modern city tends] to loosen the bonds that connect [its] inhabitants with nature and to transform, eliminate, or replace its earth-bound aspects, covering the natural site with an artificial environment that enhances the dominance of man and encourages an illusion of complete independence from nature.”⁵

This “illusion” of disconnection from nature has immense social and emotional implications for metropolitan inhabitants. To quote Tony Hiss once more: “The heaviest burden of sprawl is that, as it isolates us physically from one another, it wounds each of us inside, diminishing fellowship, and impoverishing our sense of kinship with the rest of the earth.”⁶

⁵ Lewis Mumford, “The Natural History of Urbanization” in *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (W. L. Thomas, et al, editors). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956, pp. 386 and 397), emphasis added.

⁶ Tony Hiss, Foreword to William H. Whyte, *The Last Landscape* (Republication). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002, p. x.

Chicago Wilderness and its member organizations are concerned with healing those wounds, by reconnecting people with the remnants of the natural world immediately at hand. As the metropolitan area continues to sprawl and stress levels continue to rise, the region's "green infrastructure" (the trendy new term for "green lungs") provides the essential counter-weight to deadening, depressing, isolating effects of an otherwise totally artificial metropolitan environment.

But as we consider the prospects for adding to our inventory of natural and restored greenspaces, there clearly are few, if any, large scale opportunities like the Indiana Dunes left. Chicago does not even have a ridge of highlands still available for public protection as does New York. Chicago's Calumet Area Initiative is a visionary concept for reviving that degraded region both economically and ecologically. Other than that kind of opportunity, what remains are scraps of prairie, forest, dune, or wetland that have been skipped by earlier development. Gunnar Peterson taught me that even a five-acre tract of unplowed prairie, like Peacock Prairie in Glenview, is worth saving. As the wave of development sloshes unevenly outward, there must be dozens if not hundreds of such scraps of nature left to be salvaged, protected, studied, interpreted, and enjoyed by the people living nearby.

Meanwhile, there are many new benefits to be gained from older greenspaces and abandoned vacant lands. Parks can be adapted to new recreational uses and cultural preferences. Volunteers are removing invasives and planting native species. School-based urban gardens are thriving, such as those stimulated by Will Allen's Growing Power program based in Milwaukee. Stream restoration improves water quality and biodiversity, and connects people to their local watersheds. Environmental education programs, such as those run by Chicago Wilderness, are introducing kids to the wonders of nature, as found right at their doorsteps and under their noses.

One of the most important potential benefits of urban ecology restoration and education efforts is the opportunity for contact and shared experience among people from diverse neighborhoods, backgrounds, and walks of life. Such activities may thus help to relieve the sense of helplessness and loss of "community" that is a widely lamented attribute of metropolitan growth. Apart from numerical indicators such as trees planted or protected, wetland acres restored, invasive species removed, fish stocks

revived, songbirds counted, and bugs discovered by children, there may be a penumbra of good feeling and sense of belonging that comes from direct personal contact with nature and each other. This may be a key element of social adaptation to life in the enveloping 21st century metropolis.

Chicago Wilderness—you have had a brilliant decade. Keep up the great work for many decades to come!