

London as the World's First National Park City

By Tim Beatley

At Biophilic Cities, we are frequently suggesting the need to reimagine cities and urban life. We need a new narrative, a new story that blends the natural and the cultural. We believe that future cities should aspire to an immersive vision of nature and we often suggest the need to transition from designing parks in cities to a vision of a city as a park.

The work of geographer and [National Geographic Explorer Daniel Raven-Ellison](#) is moving us close to such a vision, through what he calls a [National Park City](#). For him, it flows from an epiphany that more than half the London metro area is comprised of parks and nature -- 53% to be more precise. It is a startling number and to be sure this represents a highly fragmented and fractured set of small spaces around the city, from road verges to backyards and some larger parks and landscapes such as [Hampstead Heath](#) (one of my favorite places). The 53% number is in some important ways a mental gamechanger. There is more land area in greater London undeveloped, and in some degree of natural state, than there is in the homes and offices that make up the built environment.

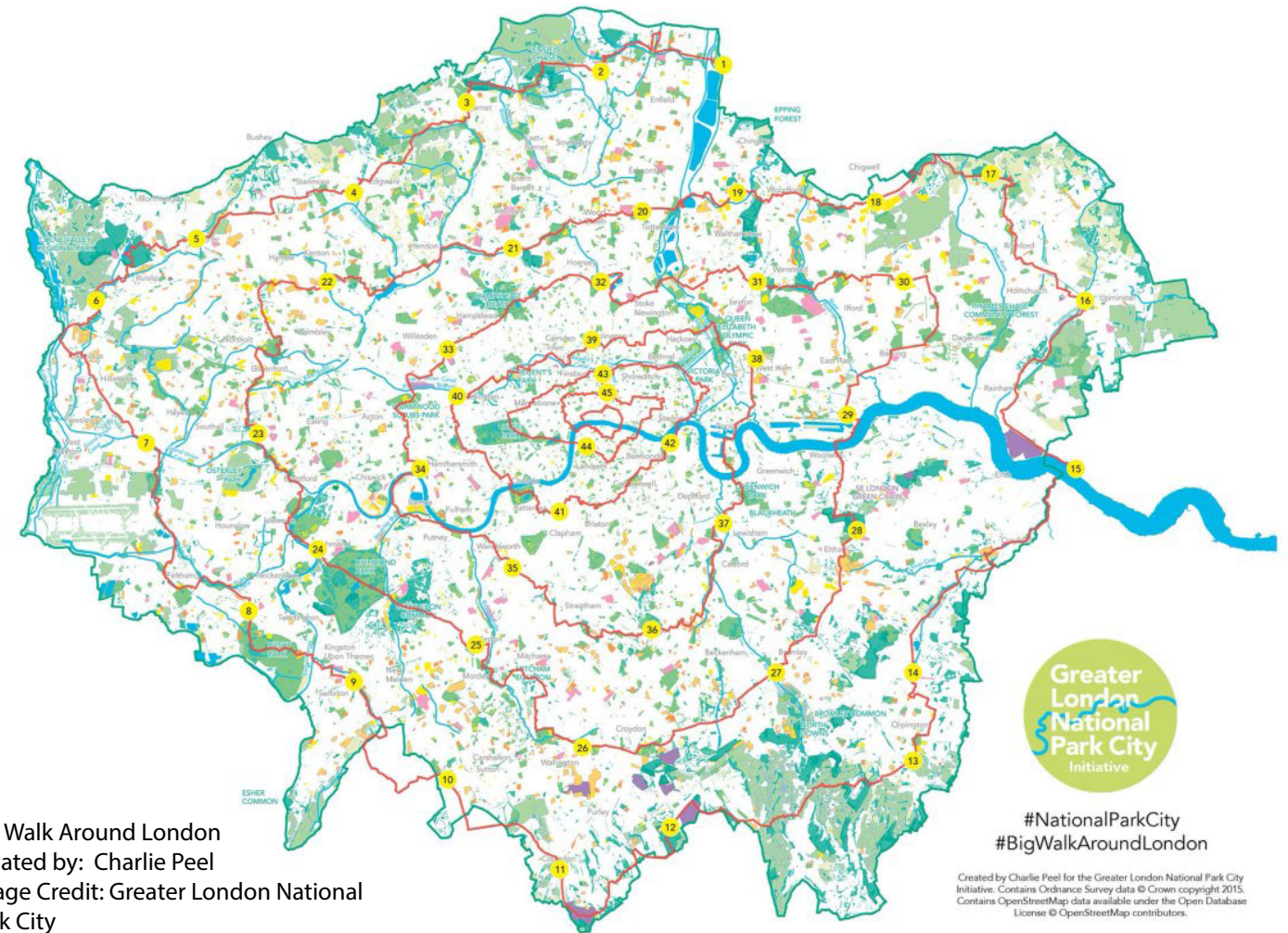
I spoke recently with Daniel about the genesis of this work. It grew for him out of the experience of visiting all fifteen of the UK's national parks, and finding the lack of any urban connection curious: "I just wondered why it was that considering the fact that 10% of England, and 7% of the United Kingdom, is urban habitat, why that kind of habitat wasn't reflected within the family of national parks." Cities are also places of remarkable agency for residents, Daniel tells me: "I have incredible power to influence my street, my garden, my house, my local community." In these ways, urban communities have significant power to shape future nature. By "flipping", in a big way, our collective conception of what a "national park" is (think your backyard, or the town square) we begin to see these spaces with new eyes, new possibilities, new reverence as habitats that support significant biodiversity and ecosystem functions.

Much of the work to date has been mustering support for the idea. Raven-Ellison believes that the best level to work at is the "ward", essentially the smallest electoral unit in the British system. Already, some 238 wards have voted their

support for making London a National Park City, and he believes that they will reach a majority of wards voting in favor (only one has voted against so far). There is also an online petition and he has attracted the support of London Mayor Sadiq Khan. What the designation will ultimately mean in practice is unclear -- no new budgetary or planning powers would derive from it. The effects will be more mental and perceptual; a shift that will hopefully, in turn, convert to new personal commitments and public priorities.

Raven-Ellison has been doing many things to raise awareness for this idea. He recently completed a "Big Walk Around London" covering 560 kilometers and crossing the Thames River some eleven times. You can see here the spiral route he took, speaking with people along the way. I followed his progress on Twitter and was amazed at his obvious stamina as he conducted many walking conversations with various citizens and officials along the way.

Raven-Ellison is busy building support in other ways too. One major initiative has been publishing a map of the



Big Walk Around London
Created by: Charlie Peel
Image Credit: Greater London National Park City

Greater London National Park City. It is beautiful, at once a practical guide to where to find nature, and a useful guide for residents to see how they might enjoy nearby nature (and how remarkably close it is). It is also a tool for grasping the larger concept and for seeding a new mental map of the city. Already, 6,000 copies have been distributed. There is also a crowdfunding campaign to raise funds to plant wildflowers -- 9 million wildflowers actually, one for every resident of London.

Daniel and I spoke of applying this idea to other cities. Washington, DC, another capital city (and home to the National Geographic Society), might be a logical next step. There are

natural synergies with the idea of DC as a National Park City, as DC is also a partner city in the Biophilic Cities Network. And in DC's case there are already more than [thirty different U.S. National Park System units within the city](#) (Rock Creek Park and Anacostia Park to name just two) making the idea even more appropriate. We can only hope that the idea catches on. Daniel speaks of the first reactions that he gets when he introduces the idea of a National Park City: "On the whole people tend to think 'this is crazy.' But then you explain to them the idea and they think 'okay, that's pretty awesome, how can I get involved?'"

Resources:

City of London. Hampstead Heath. <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/green-spaces/hampstead-heath/Pages/default.aspx>.

Daniel Raven-Ellison: Guerilla Geographer & Creative Explorer. <https://ravenellison.com>.

Greater London National Park City Initiative. <http://www.nationalparkcity.london>.

National Geographic Society. Guerilla Geographer: Dr. Daniel Raven-Ellison. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/news/real-world-geography-daniel-raven-ellison>.

U.S. National Park Service. District of Columbia. <https://www.nps.gov/state/dc/index.htm>.