

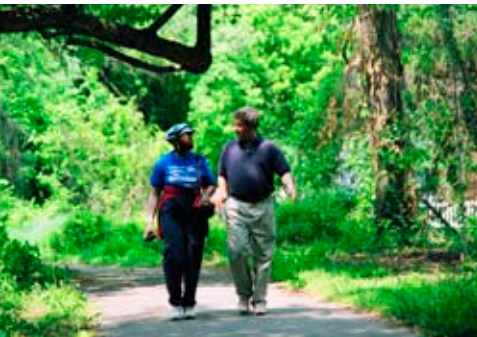


Growing a Healthier DC: Greening Parks and Open Space



In a healthier D.C., parks and open space are green

Trees shade and add beauty to play areas, trails and gathering spaces. Green parks and plazas are used by residents, workers and tourists throughout the day and evening. All children have nearby natural areas for unstructured play. Triangle parks use raingardens to capture and filter stormwater runoff from the adjacent roadways. Landscape is used creatively to allow even small green spaces to provide respite from the urban noise and heat. Parks and open spaces form green corridors for birds and other urban wildlife.



Green parks

- Offer a variety of opportunities for recreation and relaxation
- Allow city-dwellers to interact with nature
- Provide habitat for birds, squirrels and butterflies
- Cool the city, reduce stormwater runoff and clean the air
- Increase property values
- Attract new residents and businesses to the city

DC has over 7600 acres of parks and open space, 90% of which are in large, federal parks.



Recreation and relaxation call for green environments

Green refreshes. While most people associate parks with ball fields and swing sets, the natural features of our parks are equally important. Spending time in green surroundings reduces stress levels, enhances mental alertness and refreshes our ability to concentrate.¹ Play in nature is increasingly recognized as important for healthy child development.²

Big and small spaces. Research indicates that the green spaces we experience everyday have a greater influence on our health and well-being than those requiring special trips. So while regional parks like Rock Creek are tremendous assets, the parks and public spaces around our homes, workplaces and schools have the greatest impact on our mental and physical health.³ This is especially true for groups with lower mobility, like the young, the elderly and the poor.^{4,5}



Environmental services. In addition to their beauty, DC parks are an important part of our green infrastructure, providing valuable ecosystem services by purifying our water and cleaning the air. Large and small parks also break up urban heat islands, reducing summer temperatures and air conditioning costs.





Walking, jogging, and picnicking are among the most popular activities in DC parks.

The Challenge and Opportunity

With over 7,600 acres of parks and open space, Washington, DC has one of the nation's highest ratios of parkland per resident. The majority is in natural areas with wildlife, historic resources, picnic areas, and trails for hiking, jogging and biking. Natural areas like Rock Creek Park and the Capital Crescent Trail are used by millions each year. By contrast, due to environmental degradation and neglect, a number of large open spaces and forested areas – particularly those east of the Anacostia River – are seen as run-down or threatening places. Design upgrades, improved access, programming and regular maintenance would transform these parks into community and regional assets.

Many neighborhoods in the District are defined by the parks and open spaces within them: Dupont Circle, Lincoln Park, Marvin Gaye Park/Watts Branch. These spaces that people identify with and congregate in are filled with trees and greenery. With increasing numbers of residents in what were once exclusively commercial or industrial neighborhoods, demand for parks in areas like the Capitol Riverfront and NoMa calls for creative design to take advantage of pocket parks, circles and privately-owned open space. These smaller spaces can also be designed to provide essential services, such as stormwater management and cooling shade.

Recommendations

- Dedicate resources to ongoing maintenance of park trees and landscape.
- Inventory, set targets for and track green assets like tree canopy, pervious versus impervious surfaces and stormwater controls.
- Restore the natural environment in large parks, including stream buffers, wetlands restoration, daylighting of streams and invasive species removal.
- Balance natural areas and open landscapes with newer uses, such as dog parks and community gardens.
- Work with federal, local, private and nonprofit partners to create new and upgrade existing open spaces for new neighborhoods.
- Retrofit triangle parks to manage stormwater from the surrounding roadways.

The District has 231 triangles or “mini-parks” formed by street intersections.

¹ *Beyond Toxicity: Human Health and the Natural Environment* by Howard Frumkin, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 20(3), Apr 2001.

² *Nature and Childhood Development* by Stephen R. Kellert, *Building for Life: Designing and Understanding the Human-Nature Connection*, Island Press, 2005.

³ *Healthy People Healthy Parks: Public Health Benefits of Parks and Open Space* by Karen Mumford, *City of Wichita, KS Dream in Green Speaker Series*, Apr 24, 2007.

⁴ *Coping with Poverty: Impacts of Environment and Attention in the Inner City* by Frances E. Kuo, *Environment and Behavior* 33(1), Jan 2001.

⁵ *The Benefits of Nearby Nature for Elderly Apartment Residents* by Janet Frey Talbot and Rachel Kaplan, *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 33(2), 1991.

Greening Parks and Open Space is one in a series of issue briefs from Casey Trees. *The Growing a Healthier DC* series is a product of conversations with a panel of national and local experts convened in cooperation with District agencies, organizations and foundations. The panel examined how green infrastructure could be used to maximize social, economic and ecological benefits in the District of Columbia.

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