



**New York City Council
Oversight Hearing: New York City's Climate Resiliency Efforts
Committees on Parks and Recreation and Environmental Protection, Resiliency, and
Waterfronts
October 11, 2023**

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My name is Emily Walker, and I am the Senior Manager of External Affairs at the Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC). Thank you to Chairs Krishnan and Gennaro and the members of the Committees on Parks and Environmental Protection, Resiliency and Waterfronts for the opportunity to speak today.

In this era of climate instability, we believe that our parks, and in particular our natural areas, play a tremendous role in protecting and fostering a more resilient city. Research consistently shows that access to quality green spaces and parks have a multitude of benefits for residents of cities, while also providing crucial habitat for flora and fauna.

We also know that our parks function as critical green infrastructure, in addition to serving as spaces for passive and active recreation, and vital respite for city residents. When it comes to our natural areas, the data is clear:

- They contain up to a quarter of the existing canopy in NYC, but account for nearly 70% of the carbon stored, and 83% of carbon sequestered by trees across the city;
- They are almost 10 degrees cooler than our streets during extreme heat events;
- They prevent \$4.8 million in hospital bills from pollution-induced illness annually;
- They provide \$2.2 billion in recreational value, \$1.1 billion in public health value;
- They soak up as much stormwater as \$580 million worth of new green stormwater infrastructure.

Our natural areas convey all of these benefits to NYC despite decades of disinvestment. It should be noted, however, that as we continue to delay the proper funding for management and care of our natural forested areas and wetlands, these benefits will diminish, putting more strain on our city and its residents.

We are deeply alarmed that these benefits are today at risk due to the citywide budget cuts that were announced in September. As an agency already operating on a relative shoestring, the mandated 5% budget cuts will have a catastrophic impact on the ability of NYC Parks to implement much of its work, including crucial care for our natural areas and urban forest.

On Earth Day, the NAC stood proudly with Mayor Adams as he committed to \$2.4 million in baselined funding to formalize, maintain, and program over 300 miles of nature trails in our city parks, which would unlock access to over 10,000 acres of invaluable green space for New Yorkers. We are profoundly disappointed that the funding for this initiative, prioritized in the 2023 *PlaNYC: Getting Sustainability Done* report, will no longer be implemented for its intended purpose as a result of the 5% budget cut.



Trail formalization is not just about increasing public access, an urgent need for a city as dense as New York, but also about ensuring that our natural areas remain safe for recreation, while decreasing negative impacts, such as reducing forest fragmentation and managing invasive species. The stresses on our natural forested areas and wetlands are tremendous, and without appropriate public investments in their care, we stand to lose these assets entirely.

We applaud the Council's efforts to examine the intersection of resiliency and our green spaces, but we also believe the urgency of this moment requires us to speak out about further constraints on the budget for NYC Parks. Despite decades of chronic disinvestment in the agency, our peers at NYC Parks have moved a tremendous amount of innovative work forward that has increased the health, resilience, and condition of our parks and green spaces to the benefit of all New Yorkers. But they cannot continue this work without consistent and meaningful funding, a goal that has eluded the city for decades.

Our parks and natural areas benefit the lives of every New Yorker, from longtime residents to our most recent arrivals. While we understand that moments of crisis demand hard choices from our elected officials, we also believe that these choices shouldn't come at the expense of the shared resources that make our city more resilient and livable, and that provide pathways to good, green jobs amid the worsening climate crisis. We call on our elected officials from every level of New York City's government to work together to restore the proposed budget cuts, and prevent additional cuts to services that make our city stronger.

