

WHERE THE
PARKS HAVE
NO NAMES

**THE NATURAL AREAS
CONSERVANCY'S APPROACH
TO UNDEREXPLORED GREEN
SPACE IS CATCHING ON.**

BY TOM STOELKER



ABOVE
NAC members
conduct an ecological
assessment of
parklands deemed
"forever wild."

Sarah Charlop-Powers grew up in the Norwood section of the Bronx not far from Pelham Bay Park, New York City's largest park. Despite Pelham Bay's oak forest, meadows, and salt marsh, she said that when her family wanted to experience nature they didn't think to stay local. They left town.

Now as executive director of the Natural Areas Conservancy (NAC), Charlop-Powers is charged with acquainting New Yorkers like herself with their natural areas. There are 5,300 acres of forests and 3,100 acres of wetlands in the city, yet most remain underexplored. "When you show these areas to New Yorkers who have lived all their lives in the city, they have these 'aha' moments," Charlop-Powers says.

These natural areas fall under the jurisdiction of the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. They account for nearly one third of park property and have been designated as "forever wild." Some areas, like the Rambles in Central Park, are preserved as part of an overarching

landscape design. Other areas, such as Inwood Hill Park, are almost entirely woodlands.

NAC is similar to a "friends of" public-private partnership. But instead of neighbors rallying to help a nearby park, the conservancy, which was created by the New York City parks department, is looking to build city-wide support for natural areas, both large and small, from the northeast corner of the Bronx to the southwest tip of Staten Island.

Charlop-Powers came on board in 2011 to write the business plan. After the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the Tiffany Foundation donated \$2 million, the conservancy began an ecological and social assessment of these "forever wilds" that built on 30 years of research already under way by park ecologists. "In the past, people would look at a single species or place," she says. "That information helped shape what we now have to do wall to wall."

Clara Pregitzer, the project manager of the assessment, says the idea of an "urban ecology" is still relatively new. "The term only started to appear about 20 years ago," she says. "And we're one of the first to develop a rigorous protocol on how to define these ecological communities."

Others are on their way. Liam Heneghan, a codirector of the Institute for Nature and Culture at DePaul University, says, "Even though most ecologists lived in cities, they didn't see what was right in front of them." Heneghan's research with David Wise of the University of Illinois on

"social ecological systems" brings human behavior into the equation and highlights how communities go about planning for conservation and the outcomes of that planning.

It's an aspect of the field that interests Charlop-Powers. "These sites are home to a very specific ecology and to a specific demographic," she says. The NAC has tapped into existing park alliances, gives tours, and hosts volunteer events around the city to better understand and then cultivate a neighborhood's relationship to its natural areas. "You have to spend the time to build a harmonious relationship so that the community has a sense of ownership for a place," she says.

Chicago and New York have their eyes on each other, and both are also watching cities around the country. The Green Seattle Partnership, another public-private partnership with a natural areas focus, has mapped out a strategic plan to restore all 2,500 acres of Seattle's forests by 2025 at an estimated cost of \$52 million, a number that the group is now reassessing to better secure funds.

"We're 10 years in to our 20-year plan," says Lisa Ciecko, a plant ecologist for Seattle Parks and Recreation. "Lots of the time, we're talking about growing a future forest, but it's not just for birds and animals; it's for people, too. And it's also about maintaining our identity. When people think about Seattle, they picture evergreen trees."

No matter the city, Charlop-Powers says the goal for each natural areas group remains the same. "We all need to build that sense of connection to these natural sites," she says, "so people know our parks are not just where you push your kid on the swing." ●

NATURAL AREAS CONSERVANCY