



**New York City Council
Committee on Parks & Recreation Oversight Hearing
Ensuring the Short and Long Term Preservation of the City's Natural Forest**

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My name is Sarah Charlop-Powers and I am the Executive Director of the Natural Areas Conservancy. Thank you, Chair Grodenchik and members of the Parks Committee, for giving us the opportunity to testify about this important topic. As Assistant Commissioner Greenfeld mentioned, the Natural Areas Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that was formed in 2012 with the goal of increasing the capacity of NYC Parks and its partners to restore and manage the 10,000 acres of forests, grasslands and wetlands under the agency's jurisdiction. Following in the footsteps of other successful park conservancies including the Central Park Conservancy and the Prospect Park Alliance, the Natural Areas Conservancy does NOT exist to replicate or replace the work of NYC Parks, rather we raise private funds, hire expert staff and work to complement and amplify the work of NYC Parks.

We commend the efforts of the Agency and the hardworking team of professionals in the Division of Forestry, Horticulture and Natural Resources to manage this large and complex resource. However, realizing the full potential of our city's natural forests for public recreation and environmental benefits will require marshaling the appropriate additional resources. To address this, we worked in partnership with NYC Parks colleagues to develop and release the "Forest Management Framework for New York City" in Spring 2018. This plan includes a comprehensive look at the condition of our city's natural forests and outlines the investment needed to manage them over the next 25 years, and we hope the Parks Committee and NYC Council will support this plan and help ensure its success.

Increased investment in our natural forests will allow us to address the following:

- 1) Our Natural forests – comprising $\frac{1}{4}$ of NYC's parkland – require comprehensive strategic management and the appropriate resources for NYC Parks and its partners.
- 2) Developing a citywide trail system will allow people - many in low and moderate income neighborhoods—new forms of recreation and opportunities for physical wellbeing. Improved opportunities for the enjoyment of nature contribute to mental and emotional wellbeing.
- 3) In the next 25 years, we will be living in a hotter and drier city with higher sea levels. NYC's forests are critical to mitigating the effects of climate change: extreme heat, capturing stormwater to reduce flooding and absorbing greenhouse gases. They should be considered an important part of the city's climate solution.
- 4) NYC's natural forests are at a tipping point - they need sustained strategic investment or will decline in quality. This will ensure that we do not find our forests in a crisis that creates a costly, generational backlog of work. Our forests are at risk of losing biodiversity that, once lost, can never be regained.

The participation by many groups in this hearing and increasing number of volunteers and users of natural areas indicate a growing and vocal constituency for this vital New York City resource.

In order for our plan to be successful, we first needed in-depth information about our city's natural resources. As a first step, we hired a team of 25 expert researchers and conducted a comprehensive ecological assessment of all 10,000 acres of natural areas. This created a baseline of information about the condition of nature in NYC Parks. We also partnered with the US Forest Service, who conducted a companion social assessment to understand how our city's natural areas are perceived and used. This extensive research is the basis for the Forest Management Framework and the other data-driven tools we've created.

Following the successful Million Trees campaign, the NAC identified the need to plan what came next and address a much larger area of New York City forests. We conducted an in-depth study of the condition of forests and wetlands. Our findings were surprising:

- NYC's forests are diverse and dominated by native trees. Our mature forests are similar to the Catskills – dominated by old, native trees.
- The next generation is less healthy - in contrast to canopy trees, the understory is only 45% native. Our young forests are threatened by fast growing invasive species, dumping and unauthorized trails.
- Most of the trees in our natural areas were NOT planted. They are naturally occurring, growing from seeds. That is the sign of a healthy forest – and a less expensive alternative to planting trees.

Our research also found that natural forests are an important resource for New Yorkers. Spending time in nature provides significant cognitive and emotional benefits. Our city's natural areas offer an opportunity for New Yorkers to have a "wilderness experience" that includes access to beauty, inspiration and quiet that is unique from other experiences in our parks. However, interviews with more than 1,600 park users showed that people are more likely to recreate in natural areas that are maintained. This includes well marked trails, regular patrolling by rangers and enforcement officers, clear signage and healthy forests.

In addition to being an important resource for New York City residents for recreation, our natural forests are increasingly important in the face of climate change. Across the US, extreme heat kills more people each year than hurricanes, flooding and storms combined. Natural forests reduce local temperatures and also absorb carbon, providing a double benefit as a local climate solution.

The Framework includes a citywide model that maps the condition of forests in more than 50 parks. It allows us to understand the full range of conditions that exist across NYC and to estimate the investment needed in order to restore and manage all 7,300 acres over the long term.

The NAC led the development and promotion of the Framework, and NYC Parks has adopted the recommendations and uses the Framework to prioritize and track their work. The Framework calls for significant investment over a long-term period, an estimated \$385 million over 25 years, but we believe these costs are relatively modest, considering the critical impact this investment will make. We need to invest now in order to ensure that we do not find our forests in a crisis





where deferred investment creates a generational backlog of work. New York City's forests are at risk of losing diversity that, once lost, can never be regained.

The Framework is both a financial planning tool and a new approach to prioritizing where and how to work. NYC Parks is using the Framework to prioritize where it works, to evaluate the effectiveness of its restoration efforts, to inform what species to plant. The NAC is working to continue research, expand public access, and create alignment between the work of nonprofit partners, park conservancies and NYC Parks. All with the goal of restoring and protecting nature through sound science.

We are striving to ensure that every New Yorker has access not just to a park, but a place where they can connect with wild nature. New York City's population is on the rise, leading to crowding in flagship parks such as Central Park. Congestion in parks can be relieved by the restoration and improvement of the city's natural forests, which occupy one quarter of the city's parkland. Developing a high quality, comprehensive trail system will open up quality, safe, recreational spaces citywide. We are working with NYC Parks, the Student Conservation Association, and other partners to improve trails, distribute trail maps, and make natural areas more easily accessible.

Pursuing the goal of effective and uniform forest management citywide, the NAC provides support to nonprofit conservancy partners, including helping them prioritize their natural resource projects and allow them to align their efforts with that of NYC Parks. In 2018, the NAC provided pro bono consulting to the Prospect Park Alliance and the Forest Park Trust to develop 5-year management goals for each park and to create a list of priority restoration projects and cost estimates. These organizations are using the NAC's recommendations to prioritize where to deploy existing resources and to fundraise for new investment in their forests. We seek support to expand this approach to more than a dozen additional partners such as Friends of Van Cortlandt Park, Alliance for Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Greenbelt Conservancy, and many other groups that are uniquely positioned to expand forest management efforts citywide.

Protecting and promoting NYC's nature cannot be done alone. NYC Parks, despite its size and reach, can't do it. The NAC can't do it alone, nor can our partner conservancies, or local groups. New York City Nature Goals 2050 was an initiative started by the NAC to develop shared goals and targets for NYC's myriad environmental groups, both large and small, and increase our coordination and advocacy for NYC nature. This coalition brings a powerful voice to plan and advocate for the future of New York City's nature.

With this said, I'd like to thank all our partners who've come out today to support our goals of managing our important and beautiful local forests and we hope you will support the Forest Management Framework as an important plan for the future of our city.

Investing in our natural forests is an idea whose time has come. This administration has the opportunity to continue to be a leader on this emerging topic. Together, we can make NYC more resilient, protect our natural history and incredible biodiversity, and provide our children and each other with access to inspiration and beauty right here in our own backyards.

