



**New York City Council
Preliminary Budget Hearing - Parks and Recreation
March 22, 2023**

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My name is Sarah Charlop-Powers, and I am the Executive Director of the Natural Areas Conservancy. Thank you to Council Member Krishnan and the members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation for the opportunity to provide testimony about the proposed Fiscal Year 2024 budget for NYC Parks.

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 and wetlands under the agency's jurisdiction. Our natural forests and wetlands comprise one third of the city's park system, and are the only places where over 50% of New Yorkers go to experience nature. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that visitation to natural areas increased by 65%, highlighting the importance of these spaces for respite and recreation.

Today we support the call to dedicate 1% of the City budget for parks, and ask that the City Council and the Mayor commit full funding for the Play Fair budget platform. I specifically want to highlight the ask of **\$3.5 million in expense funding in the Fiscal Year 2024 Parks budget** to support the care of our city's natural areas. The \$2.5 million allocated to natural areas in the Fiscal Year 2023 budget was a critical investment in the continued care of our natural areas, supporting the maintenance of 1,200 acres in 57 parks, hosting 55 trainings for advanced volunteers, and planting 30,000 native trees and shrubs.

The allocation of \$3.5 million in Fiscal Year 2024 would support the retention of 44 seasonal staff lines, as well as the addition of five seasonal staff to support public access improvements and wetland resilience. \$3.5 million would also provide vitally-needed OTPS funding to support the purchase of native trees and for non-capital contracts.

We're proud to have co-created the Management Frameworks for Forests, Wetlands, and Trails with NYC Parks, which each set a long-term vision and detailed roadmap for the care of this critical public infrastructure. However, the city has failed to fully invest in these plans. Our increasing reliance on inconsistent and unassured levels of single-year funding is making it impossible for our colleagues at NYC Parks to effectively move these complex multi-year projects forward.

Unlike other features of our parks system, our natural areas can't afford to be subject to continually deferred maintenance. Natural forests make up 24% of New York City's parkland, and yet in Fiscal Year 2022, NYC Parks received only 0.0042% of the City budget to maintain them. For natural areas like our city's wetlands, deferred maintenance can mean these crucial assets disappear entirely. We are already losing six acres of wetlands in NYC each year.



In this era of climate change, investing in the proper care and maintenance of our natural areas is an investment in protecting New Yorkers. As we learned from Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Ida, the devastating impact of floods is being felt by our frontline coastal communities, and in many inland neighborhoods citywide.

We know that thriving forests and wetlands provide many benefits, from absorbing stormwater, removing particulate matter from the air that we breathe, providing habitat, and giving us the space to recreate and engage with nature. The NAC recently completed research that found that for every \$1 invested in caring for our natural areas each year, the city will see a return on investment from \$84 to \$120 annually. Using the 25-year, \$385 million funding model of the Forest Management Framework as an example, NYC would see an investment return of \$32 to \$46 billion. Simply put, investing in the care of our natural areas is a win for all New Yorkers.

Today, I stand with my trusted colleagues and friends in strong support of Play Fair, calling for the full reinstatement of funds that were cut from the agency's budget last year. It is imperative that next year's budget include \$3.5 million to continue conserving and caring for our natural forests, and begin critical improvements for our City's wetlands and trails network.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to express our support for increased investment in NYC Parks.

