

# All hail London's urban jungle as it becomes first national park city

**No planet B** | With impressive biodiversity and ecosystems, London should set a trend for metropolises everywhere as it becomes the first National Park City in the world

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Nicolas McComber/Getty

By Graham Lawton

I'VE lived in cities all my life and have always felt that the urban environment is my natural habitat. I never imagined I'd end up living in a national park. It turns out that I was wrong. Well, sort of.

No, I'm not moving to the country. It is moving to me. On 22 July, London will become the world's first National Park City.

When I moved here nearly 30 years ago, I discovered that Londoners are given to boasting that their city is the greenest in the world. If you amalgamated all the green spaces – parks, squares, gardens, woods, allotments, sports pitches, marshes and churchyards – it is said that they would add up to about half of the city.

That isn't quite true. Figures compiled by the [World Cities Culture Forum](#) show that public green space actually covers 33 per cent of London, a middling figure bettered by Sydney, Stockholm, Oslo, Vienna, Singapore and even Los Angeles. But it isn't to be sniffed at: Istanbul manages just 2.2 per cent and Tokyo 7.5 per cent.

The declaration of National Park City status is an achievement for those who have campaigned for it for years. But it doesn't carry much official weight. London hasn't been added to the UK's [15 official national parks](#). There was no public inquiry or order from the environment secretary, as is required to create one. London has effectively bestowed the status upon itself. But movements have to start somewhere, and the city's elected leaders have committed to deeds as well as words, including a pledge to plant more trees and create more green spaces. The city's biggest [car-free day](#) yet will happen on 22 September.

Residents of the UK's actual national parks may look down their noses on London as a vulgar urban gatecrasher to their refined country club. But magnificent as parks like the Lake District and South Downs are, the truth is that they are often managed more for people than for wildlife. The Lake District, for example, has been called a ["sheepwrecked wasteland"](#) and a "monument to subsidised overgrazing and ecological destruction". Three-quarters of its supposedly protected nature areas are in poor condition.

In comparison, the UK's cities are biodiversity hotspots and home to vibrant ecosystems.

The fact that they are largely artificial ecosystems doesn't matter. So are the rainforests on most tropical islands. Visit the Seychelles or Hawaii and what looks like native forest is actually a hotchpotch of mostly invasive and introduced species. London's parks and gardens are full of exotic plants, its waterways teem with Chinese mitten crabs and its skies are full of parakeets from the foothills of the Himalayas. Native species are faring well too; if you want to see a wild fox in the UK, I'd recommend a safari to my local kebab shop rather than a trip to the countryside.

## **"I'm not moving to the country, it is moving to me when London becomes the world's first National Park City"**

From the perspective of biodiversity and ecosystem services – the economic value of nature – the fact that you have a lot of non-native species matters little. Increasingly ecologists say there is no such thing as a pristine ecosystem; what matters is its functioning as a whole. Yes, some invasive species are a threat to native biodiversity – mitten crabs, for example – but most aren't.

London can also be compared to what ecologists call "cultural landscapes" – human-created wild spaces such as the Côa valley in Portugal. These are mosaic landscapes with a mixture of woods, open spaces and waterways, rich in biodiversity but dependent on humans to keep them that way. Rewilding projects often aim to maintain these landscapes that would otherwise be lost if they were actually left to run wild. That should be London's goal – to create and manage a mosaic urban

ecosystem that makes good on its boast to be the greenest city in the world. Let's call it urban rewilding.

Of course, big cities have environmental problems. London's include a transport system that is often reliant on fossil fuels, dreadful air pollution and a built environment that still relies too heavily on concrete, steel and glass. The proposed [third runway for Heathrow](#) airport would make a mockery of any green aspirations. If National Park City status is to mean anything, it must create impetus and authority to confront those problems.

In an increasingly urbanised world – more than half of people now live in cities – the urban environment is vital to creating a sustainable future. It is easy to be cynical about London's self-declared status, but I'm proud to live in the world's first National Park City, and urge other big cities around the world to join us.

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