

# LONDON NATIONAL PARK CITY

Based on an interview with:  
**Daniel Raven-Ellison**  
National Park City  
Foundation, UK.

Improving life in the city through small and achievable actions

## COMMITMENTS

2 4 5

**Quote as:** Raven-Ellis, D. London National Park City. P. 110-115. In: Mejia, M. A., Amaya-Espinel, J.D. (eds.). *BiodiverCities by 2030: Transforming Cities with Biodiversity*. Bogotá. Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt. 2022. 288 pages.

**The London National Park City is a movement that has coordinated the efforts and actions of residents, visitors, and partners to promote London as a National Park City and make the city greener, healthier, and wilder. It successfully campaigned to make London the world's first National Park City in 2019 by leading inspiring grassroots campaigns and recruiting allies and politicians with a non-partisan agenda. Next up is what the London National Park City's promoter told the editors during an interview.**

## REFRAMING THE IDEA OF A CITY

London is internationally famous for being a cultural, political, and financial center, but it's an ecological

center too, even if people don't think of it that way. But why approach London –or any city in the world– from the national park mindset? Life in cities is somehow perceived as inferior. Scientists have historically decided which piece of nature is worth protecting, arguing biodiversity values or the importance of ancestral knowledge. Cities are not usually thought of as habitats or places hosting valuable knowledge about nature. Therefore, this approach is a significant reframing of the city as a whole.

There are three main types of Natural Parks in the world. The first is where the federal government holds most of the power. Then there are those working through a partnership where you deal with private businesses, groups, and individuals owning large parts of the land. The national authority also has to encour-

age and use policy to get people to do what they want in this kind of park system. And finally, those where local people are supported by the policy but look after the place themselves. London National Park City is a combination of all three of those: it takes inspiration from the world's family of national parks to call on and empower people in London and other urban areas to make where they live greener, healthier, and wilder – to get more people to enjoy themselves outdoors, and benefit from doing so, while creating a new identity both for the city and for the people living in it. And even though it is supported by the City Mayor of London and some parts of national and regional government, it's still a **grassroots** initiative. In contrast, the new Adelaide National

Park City is led by Green Adelaide, a statutory body that the State Government set up.

Ultimately, the movement is about unlocking creativity and imagination and hoping to tackle issues like poverty, flooding, air pollution, inequality when accessing natural resources and health outcomes. It's about reframing the fundamentals of what this issue is for and taking a **landscape approach** in which everyone, everywhere, and everything in the city is involved. It's a very inclusive endeavor. For instance, how can investment be spread a flatter way so that you see the power of the many in tackling issues like flooding? We ask ourselves, what might be the solution for flooding? Is it a mega sewer?, or could it be millions of people doing green infrastructure?



LONDON,  
UNITED KINGDOM

Pop. 8,961,989

1,572 km<sup>2</sup>

25 m.a.s.l.



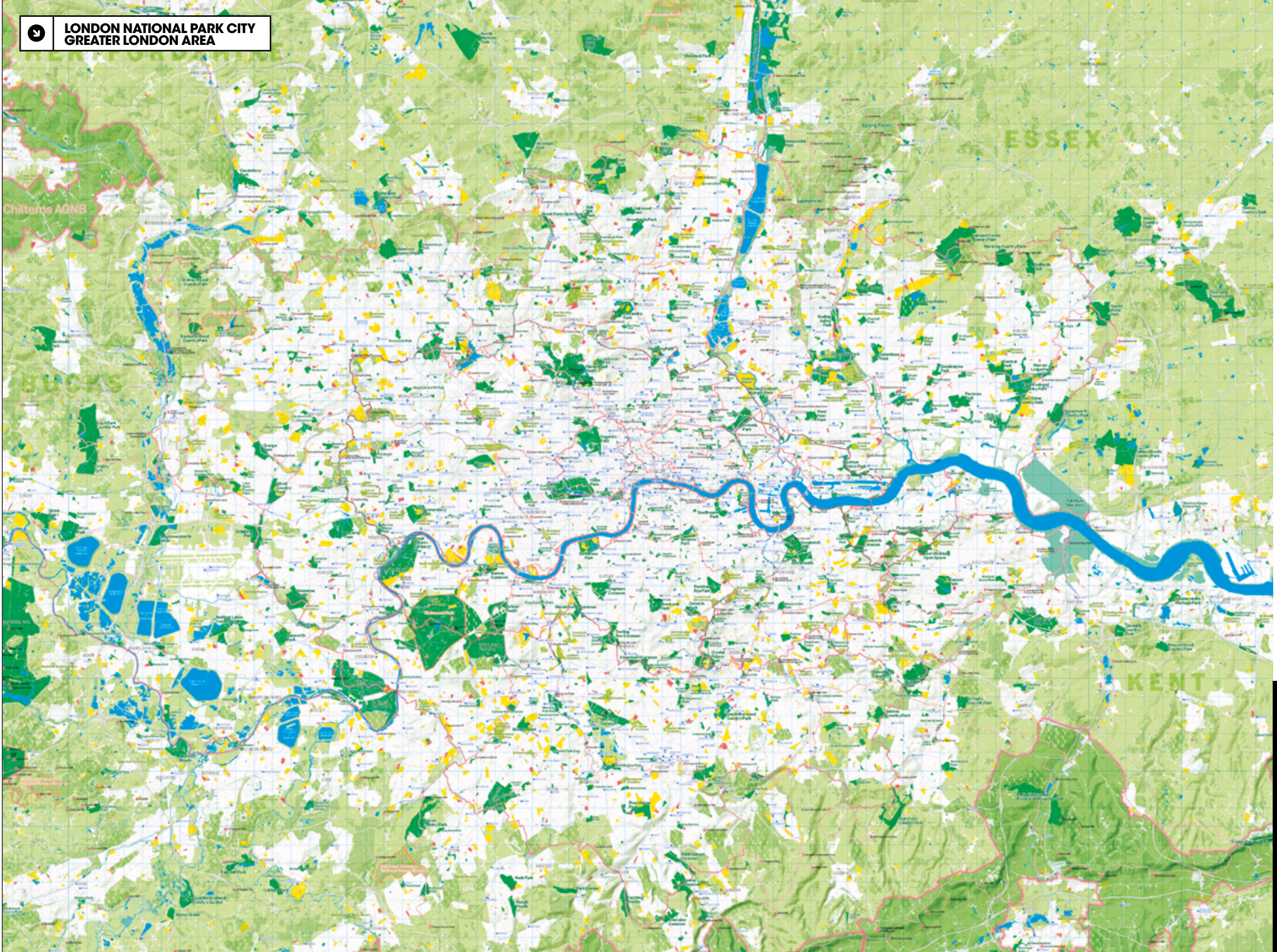
KEY  
CONCEPTS

GRASSROOTS

LANDSCAPE APPROACH

LONDON NATIONAL PARK CITY

**LONDON NATIONAL PARK CITY  
GREATER LONDON AREA**



**GREEN SPACE**

- Public park or garden including Country Parks
- Religious ground, cemetery & churchyard
- Grass, heath, meadow, farmland
- Woodland & forest

**BLUE SPACE**

- Tidal & inland water, river, canal
- Wetland & marsh

**PLAY SPACE**

- Playing field & sports arena
- Golf course

**FOOD SPACE**

- Allotment
- City farm

**PROTECTED SPACE**

- National Nature Reserve
- Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

**CIVIC SPACE**

- Pedestrian area

**POINTS OF INTEREST**

- Hill peak
- Outdoor swimming pool or pond
- Sailing
- City farm

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT**

- Rail or Overground station
- Tube and DLR station

**WALKING**

- Walk London
- London Greenways
- Other capital walks



Source:  
Charlie  
Peel - Urban  
Good. 2021.

Most maps of cities are focussed on roads and built infrastructure. As part of both campaigns and ongoing communications, London National Park City teamed up with Urban Good to create a 1m<sup>2</sup> map to reveal the city's green, blue, open and wild spaces. The purpose of the map is to inspire people to explore the city, to help see opportunities to make it greener and to help people reimagine London as landscape and National Park City.

**THE NATURE OF THE PROJECT**

The National Park idea gives citizens a common language for negotiating what it is trying to achieve for the city. That means organizing festivals or gatherings where we ensure that the people on stage come from different sectors and interest groups to cross-fertilize ideas.

As it was a grassroots and innovative initiative, it took a while for the UK Government to support National Park Cities. This is mainly because of the way it was framed, defined and co-created. Suppose a landscape approach is applied and London's population of nine million people is potentially included, even if those nine million people (dis)agree on the place's future. In that case, diversity becomes the project's greatest strength. It is possible to have a unifying vision without necessarily agreeing on the specifics of how you get there. The fact that the project doesn't have a blueprint and an exact plan for what it is trying to achieve gives it tremendous power. The vision would actually be very divisive if it were more specific.

The **London National Park City** has helped normalize the idea that cities can become a new kind of national park, both in the UK and other places. The remarkable thing about doing it in London, to some extent, is that people understand that London's a big, complex city. And if London, as famous as it is, can do it, why shouldn't other cities worldwide do it too?<sup>1</sup>

**METHODOLOGY**

The National Park City Journey Book ([www.national-parkcity.org/journey](http://www.national-parkcity.org/journey)) sets out ten steps for becoming a National Park City. Some essential methods include:

- › Meetings should be organized with people from very different backgrounds and interests asking, "What if we made this city a national park city?" should be organized. These conversations should take place in cultural, non-academic spaces where people feel imaginative and collaborative instead of alienated. Similar meetings should be constantly organized and cultivated (there will be a point where they will require a venue for 100+ attendees).
- › Politicians should be recruited from the get-go to guarantee support for any National Park initiative, making it possible to create a mandate from the people themselves. For this to happen, evidence should be collected through independent polling, media attention must be captured through presentations, letters, and interviews, and a non-partisan agenda must be set.
- › Careful thought should be put into telling stories with, of, and for individuals, communities, and the

city itself. Stories about the hundreds of thousands of homes at risk of flooding, children not playing outside, air pollution, and species in decline. These stories should include indicators and numbers to which individuals (and governments) can relate.

› Grassroots teams should reach out and allow any organization that shares their aims to befriend their movement. For instance, the London National Park City has developed a network of about 300 organizations that range from small people who look after local gardens right up to big international organizations.

**KEY LESSONS**

→ Like many cities in the world, London is full of the people, ideas, and ingredients for making the city a better place to live while tackling social, economic, and environmental crises. But also like in many other cities in the world, a challenge in London is that the energy, resources, and solutions are not being delivered at a sufficient scale and are not spread equitably. A vital aim of the London National Park City is to help good ideas and practices spread through the city.

→ Inspired by traditional national parks, The London National Park City is growing a National Park City Ranger program. Supported by the outdoor brand Timberland, this program includes over 100 coordinated volunteers who have a diverse range of specialisms to share. The National Park City Rangers include storytellers, artists, scientists, rewilders, community organizers, play experts, and people with many other diverse interests and backgrounds. The ambition is for London to have 1,000 or even 2,000 National Park City Rangers in the future - all helping with the transfer of solutions, energy, and culture.

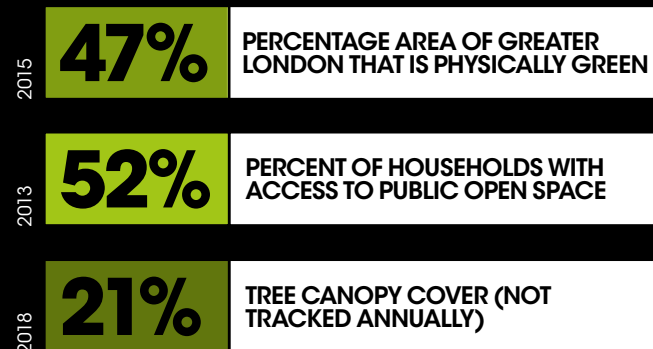
→ Mapping has been vital in the London National City Park project. Charlie Peel's one-meter square map of London was the first map that showed London as a landscape with all its green spaces, and it let people imagine how they might explore it differently or join in green spaces in a publicly consumable way. He still works with the foundation because these visualization efforts help people think of their city in new ways.

→ Other groups and organizations should also become involved at a deeper level to help resource the effort appropriately. In contrast, organizational structures that are flat enough for everyone to feel like they can get involved in one way or another should be set up from the start. That ensures other people are not accidentally excluded or alienated.

→ People from one part of the city should be taken to visit another, just to show them what's possible. Sometimes people know they want something to be bet-

**STATE OF THE LONDON NATIONAL PARK CITY 2018**

**GREENER**

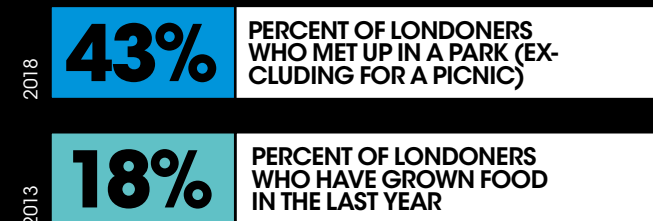


**HEALTHIER**



The flagship indicator for London as a National Park City is the percentage area that is physically green: the most recent estimate from Greenspace Information for Greater London (GiGL) is a remarkable 47%, and our aim is to increase this to over 50%.

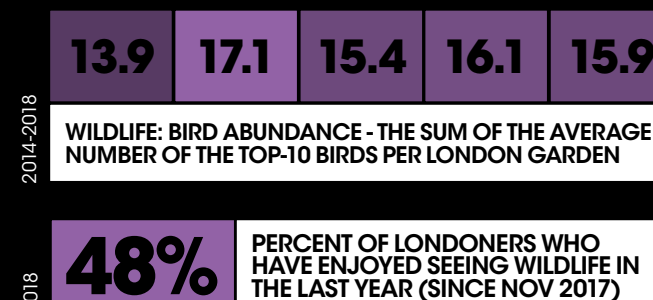
**ENJOYING THE OUTDOORS MORE**



**NATIONAL PARK CITY CULTURE**



**WILDER**



Source:

London National Park City Foundation. 2019.

ter, but they don't know what that looks like, and they're intelligent enough to work out how to do it for themselves. Sometimes it's more about the what rather than the how, as people are smart enough to work out the latter.

→ The London National Park City reframes the purpose of the city to galvanize people into action across all sectors and interest groups. The key insight here is that across our cities, wherever we are in the world, we have the solutions, the ideas, and the energy

for many of the problems we face. The problem lies in the fact that those solutions many of us are aware of are not spread equitably across cities and are not being scaled up quickly enough. In this sense, the National Park City project has made a slight power relation shift possible in terms of power relations in the mentality of people. We can't necessarily rely on governments to do everything for us, nor can governments achieve everything on their own.