Can London become a National Park?

Greater London is almost 50% green space. Can the city rebrand its urban environment as a National Park to create health and ecosystem benefits?

A green city

London is 47% green, with 8.3 million trees and 14,000 species of wildlife. It has 3,000 parks, which include 37 Sites of Special Scientific Interest and two National Nature Reserves. The land area of these, plus Greater London’s 2.8 million gardens and its waterbodies and watercourses, rivals the built environment. London is one of the greenest cities on the planet (Figure 1).

The National Park City (NPC) idea

Daniel Raven-Ellison, a former geography teacher, has driven the campaign to make London the first National Park City (NPC) in the world. The idea is to empower individuals to make their city a healthier place, to increase community cohesion, help younger people reconnect with their area, and engage businesses to become more sustainable. After a 4-year campaign, London will launch as an NPC in 2019 (Figure 2).

Aims of the NPC

- Economic development, such as growth in tourism in neglected areas that have green space, for example parts of east London.
- Promoting the health benefits of outdoor activity, and therefore helping combat mental health issues and obesity in the population.
- Improved air quality — 95% of the capital’s population currently live in areas that exceed WHO limits.

How will it work?

Because of the many urban stakeholders and complicated land use the NPC will not have one National Park Authority but will be a partnership of local government, businesses and individuals. London will be rebranded as an ecological hub, using modern technology and design to create, for example, more habitat-friendly verges, green infrastructure (e.g. off-road cycling) and green roofs. Buffer zones and wildlife corridors will make ecosystems more resilient, encouraging concrete removal will promote water storage and reduce flood risk, and promotion of eco-housing will help provide more affordable housing and address inequality.

The future?

The NPC concept has enormous potential, but there are limitations. The partnership organisation will lack statutory power and, as in other National Parks, there is a risk of conflict between economic development and conservation. The structure and function of the NPC is still under development. Look out for more information in the coming year.

Further reading

London NPC: www.nationalparkcity.co.uk
London: A National Park City? (2017) www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUJk921uBLc
Sustrans cycle-network charity: www.sustrans.org.uk