

**A Social Science Perspective on the Forest Preserves:
Seven Virtues For Connecting People and Nature
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How do people perceive and value urban green space? In what ways do people's perceptions and values of urban nature affect their use and experience of parks, forest preserves, and other green space types? Knowing this information, how can green space planners, managers, and decision makers facilitate a better "fit" between people and nature in urban settings? Answering these and related questions has been a central goal of the Chicago Urban Field Station, a social science unit of the US Forest Service's Northern Research Station. Since 1978, the forest preserves have been an important outdoor laboratory for our study of people-nature interactions, from early assessments of recreational use (Young and Flowers, 1982) to current studies of expert decision making and public support for ecological restoration practices (Watkins et al., 2015; Westphal et al., 2014). While it would be difficult to summarize this breadth of work here¹, the centennial of the Cook County Forest Preserves provides a fitting occasion to reflect upon some of the key themes drawn from it and related work, and from my personal observations as a researcher and visitor to the preserves over the last three decades.

I refer to these key themes as "virtues" and of the seven I identify here, three underscore themes upon which the system was established a century ago: beauty, naturalness, and access. Four other virtues are less apparent in the foundational writings creating the preserves but have gained prominence in more recent times: cleanness, safety, health, and compatibility. Surely these aren't the only ones that matter, and their brief description here doesn't do justice to their nuances and connections to each other. I do, however, believe that all seven are needed to guide the preserves now and as they enter their next century.

In the context of contemporary discussions about people-nature relationships, the term "virtue" may seem unconventional. While typically used to describe the desirable qualities of people, the geographer Edward Relph (1993) maintains that places may also possess unique, exceptional virtues. When these virtues are recognized and appreciated by people, places attain a degree of significance or power, as conveyed by the idea of *genius loci* or the spirit of place. Of key importance to the forest preserves, people who grow in their attachment to such places often feel a responsibility to care for them, and these acts of stewardship can result in positive outcomes for both people and nature. For these reasons it is critical that we understand the synergistic virtues of place and how managers can help foster this relationship.

Beauty

Visionary landscape planners of the late 19th century were drawn to the beauty of remnant patches and corridors of nature in the outer reaches of Chicago and together with ecologists, artists, social workers and others lobbied for the establishment of a system of preserves to protect and enhance this beauty (e.g., Perkins, 1904). Recreation and resident surveys conducted over the years consistently show scenic beauty as the top attraction of the forest preserves, and natural features of trees, water, and wildlife, singly and as composed landscape are important contributors to their beauty (e.g., Young and Flowers, 1982; Schroeder, 1982, 1990; Westphal et al. 2014). The visual aspect of beauty is most typically cited, as natural areas provide a scenic backdrop as seen from picnic groves and along roads, though those who venture deeper into the undeveloped portions of the preserves also gain value from the multisensory nature of their aesthetic experiences (Wiberg-Carlson and Schroeder, 1992; Gobster, 1999). Frequent visitors appreciate the dynamic beauty of the preserves influenced by seasonal and ephemeral changes in weather and vegetation, encounters with wildlife, and occasions of solitude. Active engagement with nature in the preserves, in self-directed activities such as birding or as part of an organized program such as volunteering in ecological restoration, can build one's knowledge and appreciation of the ecological beauty in the preserves and heighten aesthetic experiences (Gobster, 1994; Schroeder, 2000). Aesthetic experiences in nature are highly valued and can have important psychological benefits for people (Chenoweth and Gobster, 1990). Environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston (2002) asserts that aesthetic experiences in nature are also one of the most common entry points for people's adoption of an environmental ethic, and thus as a virtue of place, beauty provides a key way to promote mutually beneficial outcomes for people and nature.

Naturalness

Naturalness and beauty are companion virtues in the context of the forest preserves, and the term “natural beauty” is often stated in foundational documents and in open-ended survey responses for most important reasons why people like the preserves. But naturalness is also a rather slippery term that means different things to different people, particularly when it comes to managing for naturalness in the forest preserves (Gobster and Hull, 2000). Early interpretations of forest preserve enabling language to “restock and restore” led to the ecologically inappropriate planting of trees plantation-style in areas of native prairie and savanna, and the legacy of the “forest preserve” designation continues to challenge managers and volunteers seeking to restore these more open plant communities. Conflicting ideas of what is natural and how nature should be managed were at the heart of the decade-long moratorium that restricted restoration activity in the North Branch preserves between 1996–2006, and while ensuing public discussion and managerial changes have gone far to increase public support for restoration practices, issues remain (Gobster, 1997; 2012). Recent surveys of nearby residents and onsite users of Chicago metropolitan natural areas showed an 80% support for the use of prescribed burning to restore native plant communities, but far less support for the use of herbicides (31%) and the culling of deer (36%) (Westphal et al., 2014). If naturalness as a place virtue instills in people a responsibility to act on behalf of nature, continued dialogue is needed to come to terms with these disagreements between the means and ends of management.

Access

Access completes the triumvirate of virtues set forth by the founders of the forest preserves, who sought to acquire “lands of natural scenic beauty situated within easy reach of multitudes” (Perkins, 1904: 80). Proximity has long been the dominant metric of access, and the “easy reach” has been defined by forest preserve planners as being within a 30 minute drive. This standard may be appropriate in the context of the “regional park” concept upon which the forest preserve system is based, though studies done over the years also show that forest preserve site choice and use frequency are highly distance sensitive (e.g., Dwyer et al., 1983). For example, of Cook County forest preserve trail users who lived within 2 miles of a trail, 26% drove there and 55% used it on a weekly basis or more often, compared with 68% and 26%, respectively, of those who lived 6 or more miles from the trail (Gobster, 1995). This relationship raises larger issues of access, and as a virtue of place forest preserve planners and decision makers must also look to acquisition, linkages, programs and other ways to increase the equity of access to nature-based recreation opportunities for all residents. Accessibility within forest preserves is another consideration, including appropriate development that facilitates use for a wide range of users, including those with disabilities. On this note, expansion of the multi-use recreation trails that began in the late 1970s has greatly increased the numbers and types of users to the greater expanse of forest preserve lands that lie beyond the developed sites, and has played an important role in connecting people and nature (Gobster, 1988).

Health

Human physical health issues were an important concern of the early parks and playground movement and have come full circle in recent years due to the decline in physical activity among children and adults. “Health and physical training” was cited as the primary goal of 32% of Chicago metropolitan trail users, who compared with “pleasure-recreation” oriented users, visited trails more frequently for shorter durations and were more likely to favor nearby trails they could get to without having to drive (Gobster, 2005). There is mounting evidence that nearby nature experiences can also have important psychologically restorative benefits for people, and even brief encounters with nature can reduce stress, increase attention, and facilitate coping with the problems of everyday life. Evidence-based approaches to healthcare are increasingly embracing nature as a source of healing, and it is not so far-fetched that doctors might soon be prescribing a “daily dose” visit to the nearest forest preserve to promote human health and well-being (Sullivan et al., 2014). The forest preserves are also places where ecosystem health is an important concern, and a primary goal of those engaged in forest preserve restoration efforts has been to maintain ecological function and build resilience to disturbance pressures (Watkins et al., 2015). Conceiving health as a virtue of place makes it logical to build connections between human health and ecosystem health, promoting “restoration” in the forest preserves as an activity that has both psychological and ecological dimensions.

Cleanness

Cleanness is a particularly important virtue of place in urban areas, and with respect to forest preserve management has aspects that relate to facility maintenance, landscape management, and perceived environmental quality. Surveys of forest preserve recreational users over the years

consistently show a high concern for maintenance that extends from restrooms to litter to trail upkeep (e.g., Young and Flowers, 1982; Gobster, 1995). Expectations for cleanness can also relate to how the landscape is managed, and for some users natural areas restoration can appear messy and untended. In such cases, design, information, and programming can play important roles in communicating the goals of management, such as using familiar “cues to care” like mowing edges and framing entry paths with distinctive vegetation to provide visual coherence to sites (Gobster, 1994, 2012). Water quality is an important concern of forest preserve visitors engaged in waterside and water-based recreation. Water clarity and smell are sometimes erroneously equated with water quality, though surveys of recreationists and residents along the Chicago River corridor showed many were willing to recreate on and along it “as long as it doesn’t stink too bad” (Gobster and Westphal, 2004: 152). A varied set of stewardship activities ranging from annual litter and river clean-up days to ecological restoration service opportunities for school and office groups can engage residents in “cleaning” the forest preserves and in doing so learning the layered dimensions of this virtue of place.

Safety

Safety is another key virtue of urban places, and surveys show that forest preserve users are concerned about both the physical and social aspects of safety. Many users appreciate the off-road safety of the multi-use trails, though weekend crowding and reckless users can bring forth a different set of safety concerns (Gobster, 1995). Cleanness concerns mentioned above may not deter Chicago River corridor users from putting their boats into the water, but those who do are concerned about obstructions and poorly designed take-outs that could cause them to tip and fall in. Crime and the presence of gangs, drinking, drugs and other anti-social behavior is often an isolated occurrence in the forest preserves, but can result in a legacy of fear that persists even when actual problems go away (Gobster and Westphal, 2004). Vandalism to facilities and damage to the forest from unsanctioned uses, plant theft, and unregulated pets further contribute to the perception of disorder. Forest preserve officials can promote physical and social aspects of safety through design, management, and policing of sites. Users can also play an active role by cautioning fellow recreationists about unsafe behavior, reporting incidents, and working within community and user groups to create a positive presence that drives away antisocial uses.

Compatibility

In the context of the forest preserves, compatibility aims for a harmonious fit between people and nature, balancing recreational facility development and use with natural areas protection and enhancement. As a means to achieve this fit, forest preserve planners have long adhered to a 20%/80% formula as the appropriate level of developed to undeveloped areas, and the 2013 Recreation Master Plan provides additional guidance on compatible recreation activities. As a virtue of place, the compatibility concept can be extended both inward and outward from these area-scale planning decisions. Looking inward, our studies of the Chicago River corridor suggest that site-scale design solutions for trails, water edge treatments, vegetation management, and other facility and design features should be fine-tuned to the physical characteristics of the place and the desired experience of the user (Gobster and Westphal, 2004). Looking outward to the landscape scale, our recent study of residents living near natural areas restoration sites revealed a typology of residential landscaping practices that included “natural gardeners” who planted native plants and removed invasives, minimized watering and chemical use, and had adopted a range of other sustainable activities (Westphal et al 2014). Thinking about compatibility across this full range of scales can add value to forest preserve ecological management goals and heighten people’s connectedness with nature.

Conclusion

Protecting nature and providing for human enjoyment are sometimes portrayed as conflicting goals of public land management, yet the founders of the forest preserves recognized early on that one would not be possible without the other. The foundational of virtues, beauty, naturalness, and access helped establish the system a century ago while health, cleanness, safety and compatibility have been identified by managers and through research as additional virtues needed to sustain and enhance connections between people and nature now and into the next century of the forest preserves. The valued experiences resulting from these connections help increase the “power of place” and can spur caring and stewardship on a variety of levels. By interpreting these virtues through planning, design, programming, and other activities, forest preserve managers can help provide mutually beneficial outcomes to people and nature.

Note

1. Publications cited here are available via Treesearch, <http://www.treesearch.fs.fed.us/>. Reprints and a complete listing of articles related to research in the forest preserves are also available from the author.

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"Celebrating 100 Years of Beauty in the Forest Preserves"



We welcome you to join Forest Preserves of Cook County and Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, Forest Preserves of Cook County General Superintendent Arnold L. Randall, DePaul University President, Father Dennis Holtschneider and the Forest Preserve Foundation Executive Director Shelley A. Davis for the Forest Preserves Centennial Symposium/Tour.

The Forest Preserves of Cook County are celebrating their centennial, and along with DePaul University, the Chicago Park District and the Forest Preserve Foundation are planning a Symposium and Sagawau Canyon Tour to use the occasion of the centennial to bring awareness to this important part of Chicago's history and to indicate just how relevant the forest preserves are to our appreciation of nature.

The program will bring attention to the cultural and natural resources of the Chicago region. We hope to bring renewed attention to the Forest Preserve system's rich and storied legacy. We also hope that the conference will create excitement about this history and inspire innovative ideas and initiatives for the next century.

PANEL I – HISTORICAL ROOTS AND AESTHETIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE FOREST PRESERVES	
9:00	FATHER DENNIS HOLTSCHNEIDER INVOCATION/REMARKS FOLLOWED BY ARNOLD RANDALL'S OPENING REMARKS
9:20	ROBERT GRESE – "Dwight Perkins, Jens Jensen & the Cook County Forest Preserves"
9:35	JULIA BACHRACH – "Outer Belt for All: The Visionary Movement to Create the Cook County Forest Preserves"
9:50	ELIZABETH MILLAN BRUSSLAN – "Nature and Play: A Continuum of History in the Forest Preserves"
10:05	DISCUSSION – Arnold Randall, Moderator
11:15	LUNCH
PANEL II – CONSERVATION AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES IN THE PRESERVES	
12:30	LIAM HENEGHAN – "Jewels within Chicago's Green Halo: Local Conservation, Global Significance in CCFP"
12:50	NATALIE BUMP VENA – "Hard Work In The Open Air": Work Relief Labor in the Cook County Forest Preserves, 1931-1942
1:05	PAUL GOBSTER – "A Social Science Perspective on the Forest Preserves: Seven Virtues for Connecting People to
1:20	DISCUSSION – Cynthia Moreno, Forest Preserves Director of Conservation & Experiential Programming-Moderator
2:30	BREAK
PANEL III – WILDLIFE, ECOSYSTEMS AND THE NEXT 100 YEARS IN THE PRESERVES	
2:45	CHRIS ANCHOR – "Wildlife Management in the Forest Preserve District of Cook County: An Overview"
3:05	STEVE PACKARD – "Rediscovering Forgotten Ecosystems in the Cook County Forest Preserves"
3:20	MARY LARAIA – "The Savvy Argument for the Forest Preserves: Then and Now"
3:40	DISCUSSION – Eileen Figel, Forest Preserves Deputy General Superintendent, Moderator
4:40	CLOSING REMARKS – Eileen Figel