Assessing the Social Uses and Meanings of Green and Blue Spaces

Socio-Cultural Benefits of NNBF - Forum III
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NYC URBAN FIELD STATION

Seeks to improve the quality of life in urban areas by conducting, communicating, and supporting research about social-ecological systems and natural resource management.

https://www.fs.usda.gov/research/nrscenters/nyc
What are the uses, functions, and values of green and blue spaces as conveyed through people’s behaviors, descriptions, and narratives?
Social assessment data: For planning, design and programming

Natural Areas Conservancy, NYC: Learning more about the specific use of natural areas

Prospect Park, NYC: Exploring to see if gentrification has caused a change in park use / meaning

Coney Island Creek: Engagement around proposed waterfront development

Passaic River, New Jersey: Engagement around new waterfront park design
Social assessment data: Integration with biophysical datasets

Natural / Nature-based Features, NYC:
Integrating social data with ecological monitoring data along the waterfront

Natural Areas Conservancy, NYC:
Integrating social data with ecological assessment data within urban forest patches

Fig. 3 Overlapping social assessment zones and ecological assessment plots in NYC parklands and natural areas
Study Areas

- **NYC Parks surveyed**
  - 2013: 16
  - 2014: 22
  - 2016: 1 (Prospect Park)

- **People observed**
  - 37,000+

- **People interviewed**
  - 1600+

- **Acres surveyed**
  - 9,503

- **Waterfronts surveyed**
  - Passaic River
  - Coney Island Creek
  - Flushing Waterways (forthcoming 2024)

- **NYS DEC Forest preserves surveyed**
  - Catskills sites (2 in 2023 pilot)
  - Catskills & Adirondacks (forthcoming 2024)
Methods

- Spatially explicit:
  - Interior zones
  - Edge
- Observations of:
  - Human activities
  - Signs of human use
- Randomized interviews
- Debrief with each other
- Twitter data, if possible

(Auyeung et al. 2016)
Snapshot of Findings
Where are the people going within the park?
What are they doing there?

Pelham Bay Park

Van Cortlandt Park

Flushing Meadows Park
Human activities observed (n= 37,392)

- Socializing in Place: 31%
- Sports & Recreation: 25%
- Walking / Dog Walking: 19%
- Sitting / Resting / Standing: 7%
- Bicycling: 7%
- Nature Recreation: 4%
- Jogging / Running: 3%
- Educational Group / Tour: 1%
- Stewardship: 0.1%
- Plant Collecting / Foraging: 0.1%
- Working: 2%
- Other: 1%
Activities vary by zone
Signs of human use
Symbols

Clockwise from top left

- Nature Assemblage: Art piece
- Shrine/Offering: Orisha figurine
- Nature Assemblage: Fire pit
- Community Memorial: Tree planting
Interviews
Nature’s Benefits: Reasons for Visiting Parks and Natural Areas

- Local
- Amenities
- Nature-Outdoors
- Refuge
- Enjoyment
- Activity
- Place Attachment
- Sociability
- Social Ties

(Campbell et al. 2016)

Cultural Service (MEA 2005)
- Cultural diversity
- Spiritual and religious values*
- Knowledge systems
- Educational values
- Inspiration
- Aesthetic values*
- Social relations
- Sense of place
- Cultural heritage values
- Recreation and ecotourism*
Social meaning has a spatial pattern
Are you involved in any stewardship groups that take care of the environment?

Participating in a local stewardship group indicates a high level of environmental and civic engagement. In Prospect Park, the percentage of park users engaged in stewardship is higher than the city-wide social assessment sample.
Twitter Data
Where Else Do You Go? – Interconnectivity of NYC Parks and Beyond
Psycho-social-spiritual benefits of parkland and natural areas

- Connect with **self**
  - Refuge
  - Self-expression

- Connect with **others**
  - Social ties
  - Social cohesion

- Connect with **a larger reality**
  - Spirituality
  - Religion
  - Memorialization

(Svendsen et al. 2016)
Reading the landscape: Training in a new way of seeing

- Research assistants (8)
- Job Corps participants (12)
- Undergraduate students (75)
- TNC LEAF interns (20)
- High school intern (1)

- NYC Parks employees (ongoing)
- NYS DEC employees and backcountry stewards (ongoing)

- NYC STEM educators (upcoming)
- Guardians of Flushing Bay (upcoming)
REFERENCES

Social Assessment Resources:


Social Assessment: Waterfront-focused

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Questions?

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