

The Urban Forest

The city of Washington, DC, has been the sanctuary of my upbringing. For most, the city conjures thoughts of bright lights, hustle and bustle and of course, concrete. But for me, growing up here, DC felt more like an urban forest, littered with parks, national forests, secret treasures of greenery and bodies of brown water, all open for my limitless exploration.

Our national parks and green spaces are a treasure and a quintessential part of the livelihood of this nation. Their preservation and expansion, particularly in areas of poverty, would protect the dreams of our forefathers, in their simple desire for equality in the access to the resources and benefits that our country provides, including parks and spaces of leisure and recreation. Which when added to areas of poverty, these have the potential to bring numerous benefits to the people and communities who need them most, in a way which could contribute to ending cycles of poverty.

When the topic of environmental issues is raised, it is often sidelined by what people deem as “more important” or “imminent” issues, such as poverty and quality of life. What I set out to do is not holistically solve the deeply rooted issues of poverty and its causes, but to incorporate an environmental issue into an issue that seems to garner more attention, in a way, to my knowledge, which has not been done before.

Furthermore, the allocation of green space should be addressed through its expansion in the places which would otherwise have the least access to them. As interpreted by Frederick Law Olmsted, the grandfather of parks, green spaces and the designer of Central Park in NYC. “Green spaces are one of the staples of democratic ideals, community, and equality.”¹

To quote Olmsted, green spaces are enjoyed by a “very few very rich people. [In which] the great mass of society, including those to whom it would be of the greatest benefit, is excluded from it”².

This is why it is so necessary to drive the development of green spaces in underprivileged and up-an-coming communities as a crucial step to equalizing their availability and benefits.

In terms of mental and physical health, simple green spaces and parks carry so much more benefit than the average person might think.

Studies conducted by the USDA Forest service have shown that exposure to nature at a young age can increase attention span, especially for individuals with attention disorders such as ADD and ADHD. These studies have also shown that exposure to green spaces can decrease unhealthy urges and impulse later in life--for example, hindering one's urge to try drugs, alcohol or to commit a crime, the conditions which in many cases lead to incarceration, a major component in perpetuating the cycle of poverty.³

In terms of physical health, low-income areas, which are generally made up of disenfranchised individuals and racial minorities, make up the largest demographics of obesity

¹“Shaper of the American Landscape.” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/frla/learn/historyculture/shaper-of-the-american-landscape.htm.

²Olmsted, Frederick Law, 1822-1903. *Yosemite And the Mariposa Grove: a Preliminary Report*, 1865. Yosemite National Park, Calif.: Yosemite Association, 1993.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2018. *Urban nature for human health and well-being: a research summary for communicating the health benefits of urban trees and green space*. FS-1096. Washington, DC. 24 p.

and diabetes.⁴ The treatment of diabetes requires an average of \$8,000-\$13,000 in medical costs a year, a price far out of reach for the majority afflicted.⁵

Whether it simply be walking around, taking a bike ride, or playing a quick game of pick-up soccer with some friends, green spaces always inspire some sort of activity.

Exemplified by the surge in obesity over the past few decades, these little physical acts seem to have become lost in the fast-paced modern world of tablets and smart TV's, which nowadays are found in even the poorest of places.

In terms of diet, a major component in the development of obesity and diabetes, low-income communities lack access to nutritious and fresh foods. This is primarily due to the major difference in price between healthy foods and the easy, cheap, accessible fast food options that are often the only option in low-income communities. Fast food alone develops an entirely different set of environmental issues--a topic to be saved for a later discussion.

As evidenced by the many recent initiatives throughout cities across the nation, the development of public gardens serviced by residents and volunteers to grow fresh produce for the community could be a solution to this problem. Providing fresh and free produce for communities, this would also offer a vehicle for teaching valuable skills and knowledge of sustainability and the natural world.

Cycles of obesity and poverty consistently perpetuate themselves in part due to the lack of places of recreation as well as healthy and fresh foods--all of which can be followed back to an unequal access to green spaces.

Logically an increase in green spaces could mean vast increases in community gardens, physical activity, and cognitive abilities. This could improve the general health and well-being of low-income communities as well as help elevate cycles perpetuating poverty.

⁴"Statistics About Diabetes." *American Diabetes Association*, www.diabetes.org/diabetes-basics/statistics/.

⁵American Diabetes Association. *Diabetes Care*, American Diabetes Association, Apr. 2013, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3609540/.