

A call to action to engage urban populations with Protected Areas

Looking through the window on a clouded night in the city, a father says to his child, "There is no moon tonight." The child replied, "Let's go down to the supermarket and get another one."

All of us can offer similar examples representative of a generation of urban people who have lost their connections to nature. Are these the people from whom we ask for support for the natural environment? Our urgent messages about the future of Protected Areas make little impact in such a scenario.

All over the world, people are pouring into urban areas. In Britain, 90% of our population are now in urban areas. There is a clear need for action to enable contact with Protected Areas for urban people, to enable them to benefit from nature, laying down the basis for their awareness and committed support for nature.

All of us, who work within the natural environment sector, know what it means to experience nature at large. We know that nothing can replace the inspirational experience of standing in a magnificent landscape. No words are needed for a connection to be made in our hearts, for people to begin to love nature. Groups which we take into such Protected Areas for the first time are always thrilled. They feel transformed. Sometimes they feel overwhelmed by a sense of a powerful spiritual and cultural reunion with nature. This experience cannot be replaced by a few square feet of green space in the city. But, after experiencing the wonder of a Protected Area, these small green spaces, and indeed every single tree in the pavement, become symbols of continuity with nature, maintaining the connection in daily life.

The Urban Imperative workshops address how we can build connections between urban populations and Protected Areas. Our greatest motivations for action are the emotions of love and of fear. Our calls for action through messages of love for nature depend on enabling urban people to have inspired connections to nature. On the basis of this love for nature that we can nurture, we hope that urban people, from politicians to the unemployed, will be able to sit down long enough to listen to our more complicated messages of fear.

There are too many quick fixes to our problems which damage the environment. It is only through a deepened and informed understanding that we can get the right kind of support and action, for Protected Areas, from the urban powerhouses where most of the vital decisions are made.

Bringing together lessons from across the world

The Urban Imperative workshops at the World Parks Congress have brought together significant initiatives from across the world to focus on urban outreach strategies for Protected Area Agencies. Such a gathering generates an atmosphere of excitement, energising all of us, because the mutual exposure to our work validates our commonalities and opens us up to the potential of approaches new to us. Comparative learning powerfully sharpens our awareness to the detail of our own methodologies and scenarios, enabling us to read our contexts more fully, and to leap to new solutions through the impact of the insight and innovation of others. Such an occasion gives us all new beginnings and a strengthened working context, with the new partners for dialogue and practice playing a key role in all our futures.

A diversity of strategic approaches

The workshop highlighted:

1. The range of opportunities to engage urban people with nature

- The characteristics of the Protected Area itself defines the roles it can play in providing opportunities for engagement with urban people - there is a need for Protected Area Agencies to identify the range of activities it can offer and its meaning to target social groups
- The physical, socio-political and economic setting in which the Protected Area finds itself defines the possible approaches to engagement - whether it is an embattled gem in a sea of urban concrete or a haven at a distance from urban populations; the political status of Protected Areas in different countries; its image in the mind of the mainstream population and of target groups; the limits of its resources

- The diverse approaches to creating access to Protected Areas and frameworks of support for urban people to consolidate engagement - resourcing community groups to visit Protected Areas and experience outdoor activities which are usually not financially available to them; nurturing community champions, especially young people, to stimulate interest and formulate activities relevant to the needs of their peers; facilitating relationships between Protected Area Agencies and community organisations to enable them to work together to open up access and design relevant programmes of activities; supporting the formation of clubs, Friends groups, societies and campaigns; partnerships with business, zoos and governmental authorities; training which enable members of target groups to aspire to seek employment in Protected Areas
- The creation of green areas and strategic provision of programmes of activities within the neighbourhoods of target groups - the creation of a range of spaces including urban farms, parkland, allotments and activity centres for leisure and education within neighbourhoods which lack such amenities; outreach programmes for target group involvement; school programmes; culturally sensitive support programmes which link ethnic minority communities to National Parks; the consideration of members of the community with sensory and physical disabilities

2. The relationship of target groups to Protected Areas and the organisations which manage them

- Addressing practical barriers - lack of information and peer group experience; sheer distance and the lack of affordable public transport; the reality of inability to pay an entrance fee and the cost of equipment and activities
- Addressing barriers of perception - racism and prejudice against groups with different socio-economic and racial characteristics; lack of image or misplaced negative images of what a particular Protected Area Agency actually does; different organisational attitudes to the desirability of increasing visitor numbers in a Protected Area; the inadequate status given to the engagement of urban populations within Protected Area Agencies themselves

3. The range of social groups - their characteristics, needs and potential

- There is no such thing as a pure environmental initiative. All environmental initiatives have a social, economic and cultural context. They all have different potential to impact on the quality of life of particular social groups according to how social, economic and cultural dimensions are taken on board. In relation to many urban target groups, often it is the combination of environmental engagement with social, economic or cultural aspects which attract engagement.
- It is not to be forgotten that those who traditionally have not benefited from engagement with nature will find the experience more powerful and meaningful than those who have always taken it for granted as a feature of their lives. It means that, once engaged, their motivation is similarly more intense and the impact of the vast missing potential contribution to the care and protection of nature by presently unengaged groups is enormous.

4. Unlocking resources through building awareness and commitment at political and community levels

- Defining the benefits to cities embodied in Protected Areas to decision makers - greater efforts must be made to survey, articulate and communicate the infrastructural benefits of Protected Areas to cities, such as to the water supply, to decision makers
- Defining the benefits to cities embodied in the work of engaging people with nature and presenting it effectively to decision makers - many countries have high priorities within the social agenda and the linking of the delivery of elements of the social agenda to the environmental agenda, such as benefits to health, is of paramount importance. There is a need for research in these areas; many countries have a long voluntary sector tradition, with community groups accessing vast monetary resources from a range of funding bodies, such as Trusts and Foundations. There are significant resources which can be directed towards projects to engage people with Protected Areas
- Defining the benefits of Protected Areas to the urban population and gaining their commitment - following on the work of opening up contact with nature and programmes of activities to benefit urban people, Protected Area Agencies need to articulate the threats to Protected Areas to urban people, thereby building up awareness, understanding, commitment and support

Moving forward together

The power of a world-wide network of activists brought together to focus on Cities and Protected Areas cannot be underestimated. The members of this information network have already begun to provide mutual support, expertise and inspiration to each other. There is impetus to build on and continue to participate in furthering the recommendations to the World Parks Congress and IUCN.

We look forward to working together to:

- Fuel and resource the sharing of good practice, ideas, and expertise. And in the process provide that most essential human ingredient of supporting each other around a common goal.
- Identify and validate benefits around significant themes and trends through collecting data, instigating evaluation and research, including action research.
- Identify gaps in methodology and form partnerships as appropriate to jointly seek solutions to approach the diverse scenarios of urban engagement.

At the World Parks Congress, IUCN has begun the work of giving status to the Urban Imperative on a world stage. All of us need to use this focus and be involved in working with IUCN to give increasing weight to the importance of urban outreach strategies for Protected Area Agencies, ultimately releasing the contribution of vast numbers of urban people in terms of practical and political support to consolidate the future of Protected Areas.

As an outcome of the Urban Imperative workshop at the World Parks Congress 2003 in Durban, South Africa, IUCN has recognised the importance of engaging urban people in the future of protected areas. An international task force, the WCPA Task Force for Cities and Protected Areas, has now been set up. Judy Ling Wong OBE, Director BEN will serve on this Task Force. This paper has been written as the introduction to a collection of papers sharing the work of urban initiatives for Protected Areas from across the world. These will be published as a book in the near future.