



WALKING LONDON BACK TO LIFE

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On a bright January morning, in the lobby of a local train station, a group of walkers gather before heading into the nearby National Park. Their plan is to pass through as many different habitats as possible, following an itinerary that might have come straight from a folk-tale: over the fields, along the road, into the woods, across the stream, out of the woods, through the garden, up the hill, down the hill, through the cemetery and on until meeting the river.

It is a scene that can be found on weekend mornings in rural settings all over the British Isles. Yet this expedition promises to be a little different – the train station is Crystal Palace in South London, the river is the Thames, and the National Park doesn't exist. Yet.

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Seventeen of us assembled in Crystal Palace Station that day to do the walk. Most had come from other parts of London: Forest Hill, Alexandra Palace, Wimbledon, Richmond, Walthamstow, Hackney, West Norwood. Some had travelled further, from Essex, Sussex, even Spain. All were drawn by a shared interest in a campaign that at first might seem perversely unrealistic in its ambition: the creation of the world's first National Park City – the Greater London National Park.

The concept originated with former geography teacher, now *National Geographic* Guerrilla Geographer, and Emerging Explorer, Daniel Raven-Ellison, who was also the leader of the expedition.

When I first heard about the campaign I thought it might be an elaborate joke; but the idea nagged at me, and the more I thought about it, the more interesting it became.

I attended a campaign meeting, where I quickly realised that the notion was in deadly earnest. Momentum was building, stories were appearing in local and national press, while various influential individuals, nature and scientific organisations, as well as a scattering of politicians, were starting to take an interest.

Raven Ellison and the campaign's other early supporters had a compelling case to make. Many of the arguments for the existence of a Greater London National Park were set out on a website, that was written, a touch provocatively, as if it already existed.¹

Which, in some senses, it does. Within London's vast and greedy sprawl, there exists a significant percentage of green, blue and open space – and this is not limited to private gardens, public parks, or stray brownfield sites colonised by buddleia.

Greater London is home to ancient woodland, (small) areas of acid grassland, heath, marsh and wetland.

Together, gardens, parks, woods and nature reserves cover 47% of the city. Over 300 bird species and 1,500 types of flowering plant can be found within the capital.

Clearly if London were a National Park, it would be radically unlike any other – its green space existing in scattered, disparate pockets, a patchwork tapestry of tentative biodiversity, carved up by street, wall and concrete. The power of the place would live as much in its potential to take hold in the imagination as on the ground. Hence the walk – at once an amble to the South Bank of the Thames and a journey into an idea.

Before we set out I bought a coffee in the station café. On a board on the back wall, written in chalk, were some coincidentally apt lyrics from *The Sound of Music*:

‘Climb Every Mountain,
Ford every stream,
Follow every rainbow,
’Till you find your dream.’

With this in mind, as we moved through the city, perhaps every step would help to thread street and earth together, re-enchanting the ground as we passed, walking the Greater London National Park into existence.



We began by heading north through Crystal Palace Park and I made a mental note to look out for birds on route, as the weekend of the walk coincided with the RSPB’s Big Garden Birdwatch. Here dozens of crows shambled about on the grass slopes that stretch up towards the crumbling brickwork and model sphinxes that once guarded Paxton’s fantastical glass palace.

At the far side we crossed Westwood Hill – one of many street names in this part of London that bear testament to the area’s sylvan heritage – when swathes of modern-day Norwood, Sydenham, Dulwich and Forest Hill were once within the bounds of the Great Northwood. The next stage of the walk took us through a physical memento of this history – Dulwich and Sydenham Hill Woods.

The group entered through an iron gate off a lane, the main path through the trees was thick with mud. We trudged uphill away from the main drag before, only yards inside, briefly, implausibly, we managed to get ourselves a little lost. Before turning back downhill towards the path, noisy squawks could be heard high up in the bare branches of an oak, as three ring-necked parakeets made their presence known.

Runners and small children leading parents often sprint and toddle through these woods, but on that day it was quieter, with just a couple of dog walkers passing through. Back on track we crossed the Ambrook – a tiny stream and tributary of the River Effra, which now runs mostly underground as part of London’s sewer system. This easily miss-able threshold marks the crossing from Dulwich Woods into Sydenham Hill.

Between them the two bind tiny remnants of ancient

woodland with more recent growth, some on the sites of former gardens of long-demolished Victorian villas. Sara Maitland has a wonderful chapter on this in her book *Gossip from the Forest*.² These are very much urban woods, yet, especially on the western edge where trees butt up to allotments, cricket fields and a golf course, the place can seem at times far removed from the enclosing streets.

Stand in the right spot, peer through the fence and you can enjoy a view across the higgledy-piggledy plots of the Grange Road allotments to the Victorian Gothic of Dulwich College’s Barry Buildings. Rows of South London rooftops stretch north and west, and beyond you can make out the famous chimneys of Battersea Power Station, along with less beloved landmarks, like the Vauxhall Tower.

At the northern end of the woods, past an old bridge which once ran over the Crystal Palace and South London Junction railway line, we exit through a housing estate and emerge on the edge of the A205, a stretch of the South Circular, where traffic attempts to race between central London and Forest Hill.

On the other side of the road in the gardens of the Horniman Museum, some of us stopped to get some lunch from a weekend farmers’ market. As we stood munching, near to the Horniman’s animal walk, the view from the hill seemed particularly fitting. A little to the north stands the dramatic profile of Dawson’s Heights – an unusually striking 1960s housing estate.³

As sunlight glinted off the windows, a kit of pigeons flew past the Ziggurat-like facing plane of the building and it briefly became a jagged escarpment, the passing birds rock doves once more. Not exactly the sublime, but as it happened I half-imagined figures from Caspar David Friedrich drinking in the scene.

The group left the gardens and I got talking to some of the other walkers to try and find out how they felt about the idea of London as a National Park. Rapha, a student of Green Criminology and a photographer, had recently arrived from Valencia. His studies involve green corporate crime, forest arson in particular. Rapha was fascinated by the concept and very keen to get involved. He also regarded the walk as a good opportunity to quickly discover more of London. Soon we found ourselves in a dead-end green lane running alongside the Horniman Gardens, Rapha slowing to take shots of fungi on a fallen tree, as we retraced our steps.

Heading upwards once more, we wound our way towards One Tree Hill, looking out over the city from steeply climbing suburban streets. The view was a reminder that the shape of London is not solely the product of human endeavour. Indeed, for the last couple of miles we had been walking along a stretch of the Norwood Ridge, a high three-mile stretch of London clay that reaches an elevation of 360 feet in places.



At the top of One Tree Hill itself, another impressive panorama emerged through a tangle of winter-bare

branches. The tall buildings of the City and Canary Wharf in the distance poked up into the Horizon, lending this hill in Southwark a film-like vista looking more LA than England.

Gazing out over the scene Ferouk, from East London, and his friend were reminded of a different city view they'd once enjoyed from rugged hills in Bolivia.

Ferouk is an organiser at a Patchwork Garden Project in Hackney, aimed at helping local people to grow their own fruit and vegetables nearby. His interest in the Greater London National Park is both personal and professional, but he was particularly struck by the potential it had for changing perceptions of city life.

We headed down the other side of the hill, noting that there are now many more trees than the single Oak of Honour that gives the place its name, after Queen Elizabeth I had supposedly once picnicked beneath it. As we descended I overheard one of the party, from Haringey, informing a fellow walker that his borough has more designated ancient woodland than any other part of England.

At the foot of the hill we crossed another road and edged along Brenchley Gardens towards Nunhead Cemetery a street or two away. In the distance, still on One Tree Hill, Rapha was snapping away with his camera.

On route to the cemetery I spoke to Ben, a landscape architect. Ben was quite closely involved with the Greater London National Park campaign, and had attended meetings with officials from the Mayor's office and other local politicians, along with Raven-Ellison. He liked the way that the park idea had the potential to bring different parts of the city's green space together in a more holistic and imaginative way than their present piecemeal existence.

Despite a lot of very tall, mature-looking trees, Nunhead cemetery felt more like a park with graves than some of its more overgrown and tangled relatives like West Norwood or Highgate. As we passed through, a helicopter flew overhead, competing with the caws of a crow and what might have been the squawk of another ring-necked parakeet by the ruined chapel.

Until this point we had managed to avoid walking along too many streets, but the next stretch, past Nunhead Green and up towards Peckham Rye, was the most obviously urban we had passed through so far.

Yet even here the birds, or some of them, remained. On a double-gabled building on one side of Nunhead Green I saw a herring gull perched on a chimney, while another smaller bird I didn't recognise nestled against another. Here with the notion of an urban National Park now firmly lodged in my head, even battered garage doors, gum-spattered paving slabs and plastic bags caught in the branches of plane trees seemed somehow less dispiriting than they normally would have been.

We hit Peckham Rye and suddenly, instead of

negotiating grass and tress, we were weaving in and out of crowds as people came in and out of shops, laughing, joking, jostling. Then just past Peckham library we ducked into the slither of green that makes a grassy path along the old Surrey Canal, which runs between flats and houses all the way to Burgess Park. There amongst the cyclists, walkers and returning shoppers, blackbirds, blue tits and a robin got on with their business, rustling in the shrubs or hopping between bare branch and pathway.

Burgess Park provided a more open space than other places we'd passed through, and was much busier and more obviously in the midst of a city than the more bosky sites we'd been in earlier. Passing the park's Bridge to Nowhere, neat lines of trees and wildflower gardens framed nearby tower blocks which seemed to take on a different persona when looked at through the filter of an urban National Park.

Out of Burgess Park, the final stage of the walk took in the massive Aylesbury estate and narrow side-streets, where Victorian villas mixed with major redevelopments in the Elephant and Castle area. We headed for Waterloo through densely built, crowded central South London. Though even here, church gardens, small squares, yards, random patches of grass and trees frequently burst into view – organic gaps between the brick, concrete and tarmac.

Finally we drew near the Thames at Waterloo itself, stopping for a pint at The Kings Arms on Roupell Street – in a pocket of SE1 where a few streets of small, terraced Georgian and Victorian houses had survived intact in the midst of bigger, more imposing later developments.

By its conclusion, the walk had provided evidence, to me at least, that this notion of an urban National Park was something greater than an interesting theory. Even having lived in London for over twenty years, I was a little surprised at just how many different types of habitat there are to be found within it (and this on a walk which had only taken in one relatively small slice of the city – meandering from the South East to the centre).

There are plenty of other routes to be explored from different compass points, each with varying degrees of natural habitat. There are woods and heaths, canals and wetlands to be traversed – in and amongst the streets and shops and houses. Approaching central London from the outer south-western suburbs, it is possible to reach the Thames with relatively little sight of the built environment – and you'll pass through an extensive deer park on the way.

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But does London actually need to be a National Park? All these places are already here, so what would a change of status, or name actually mean? Simply asking the question, as Raven-Ellison does, begins to open up the possibilities.

'How would being a National Park change the way we live, work and play in the city? How would we educate



children, design buildings, plan health services or create new leisure activities differently if we started thinking of London as a National Park?

I think the idea could have an enormous beneficial impact. On the campaign website, six key areas are listed which could be positively affected if London were to become a National Park. For me, the one that resonates most is 'Children'. At a time when increasing numbers of young people, especially in urban areas, are losing any meaningful connection with the natural world, reframing the ways they can see the spaces around them could have a transformative effect. This is particularly important because many will never get the chance to visit a more conventional National Park elsewhere – although creating opportunities to rectify this would be hugely beneficial as well.

A National Park City could be much more than a gimmick, without in any way diminishing the importance of existing National Parks or other more rural, 'natural' areas. Rather than representing a retreat into what's left – 'That's it for the ice cap, the jungles, the plastic strewn oceans and fly-tipped Himalayan mountains, so let's give up and celebrate the nettle, the cockroach and the Grey Squirrel instead' – this idea is about looking again at what's close at hand, and from there reassessing our relationship with everything else beyond.

By helping children, particularly in the inner city, engage with the landscape that exists nearby; by helping them to notice things – just small things, like flowers and insects, and perhaps even to learn their names – there is

a chance to help them and others to learn to think about and care more for the wider country and world.

A re-visioning or re-enchanting of London has potential benefits far beyond the city itself. And it is easy to be a part of it. The simple act of wondering what the brown bird is in the park, noticing a fox on a railway embankment, or learning that bats can be found in places right in the middle of the city, can be the start of a new relationship with the world beyond us: a wake-up call to children and adults alike to remember where we are, what we have, what we have lost and what we may yet lose.

REFERENCES

1. Greater London National Park Campaign: <http://www.greaterlondonnationalpark.org.uk>
2. Maitland, Sara. *Gossip from the Forest*. London: Granta, 2012.
3. Dawson's Heights: <https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2014/11/25/dawsons-heights-east-dulwich-an-example-of-the-almost-lost-art-of-romantic-townscape/>

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