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Burch

## **Life on the Streets: Some Lessons From Baltimore For Reaching Out to Grow Trees, Kids, and Communities**

William R. Burch, Jr.

Hixon Professor of Natural Resource Management  
School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, Yale University

J. Morgan Grove, Research Forester  
USDA Forest Service

Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, Vermont

### **Trends and Issues**

Cities may be the glory of humanity, but not many of us have lived in them. Of all the humans who have ever lived on earth, the vast majority have lived as relatively isolated bands of hunter-gatherers, as migratory herders, or resided in scattered farming villages, farmsteads, or small trading centers. Indeed, cities have been rare and special places during the course of human history, providing habitation for only a small portion of any given contemporary global population.

In the nineteenth century a trend toward urbanization began in the industrializing regions of a few countries. However, this demographic trend was but a trickle compared to the twentieth-century flood of urbanization for most nations — non-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial. A world in which the majority of the human population resides in urban areas will be a twenty-first-century reality and a significant ecological and evolutionary transformation of our traditional pattern of settlement.

In the early stages of urbanization the central cities were parasites upon their rural hinterland, importing high-grade human and non-human resources and exporting, in return, pollution, waste, criminals, and the mentally ill. At the close of this century in North America and Western Europe, suburban settlement and metropolitan growth have diffused urbanization over large spatial scales and drained capital and human resources from urban centers, leaving the central cities to absorb pollution, waste, the disenfranchised, the poor, and the weak. These trends of urban growth in developing countries and suburban growth in developed countries have been seen by politicians and academics as problems

awaiting solutions rather than as powerful demographic and economic forces filled with more opportunities than deficiencies.

The majority of environmentalists and biologists concerned with global change have been among those most determined to see "problems" in these natural demographic and economic trends. They vacillate between a nostalgia for the civic grandeur of the nineteenth-century central city and the legislative means to "its return" and a complete neglect of urban/suburban trends in order to focus upon more "pristine, natural" habitats in regions that are thinly populated or unpopulated by humans. Ironically, the idea of nature conservation — protected areas, parks, and public open spaces — is an urban one that originated in the great American cities. As these cities' populations decline and diffuse to remote, less developed areas, their natural resource base is expanding in its capacity to restore damaged ecosystems and to improve the quality of life for those residents who remain.

The protected and restorable areas of cities stand in stark contrast to the tremendous rates of deforestation; the conversion of farmland to roads, parking lots and buildings the siltation of streams and decline of water quality and the congestion and crowding that have been the norm in the city's hinterland since the 1950s. These changes have occurred even though we continue to have an infrastructure to serve a much larger population in the central cities.

In Baltimore, for example, we could serve nearly 1.4 million people, although the actual population is declining towards 700,000. In contrast to the surrounding suburbs, there is a well-established public park and recreation land resource; thus, the decline in the number of city residents increases potential open space. Sixty-five hundred vacant lots are another substantial land resource. In some Baltimore neighborhoods, the population-to-land ratio is approaching densities close to some of the classier exurban tract-development projects in Baltimore County.

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this demographic and economic transformation worldwide. In the developing world we have people crowding into cities with only a fraction of the needed infrastructure for water, lights, sewage, social services, and waste management. In the developed cities of the United States, we have an underutilized infrastructure in great need of maintenance but without the necessary human and

financial resources to sustain it. Under both conditions of high growth and high decline there are substantial personal, familial, and institutional costs. Our point is that by concentrating only upon the "problems" we overlook the opportunities, and by bemoaning only

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the loss of resources we overlook the emerging new resources and their potential in the twenty-first century.

It has been our good fortune to work with a group of public officials and private citizens in Baltimore who are willing to consider the possibility of opportunities and emerging resources where others see only problems and declining resources. The mayor, his cabinet, the Department of Recreation and Parks, and the Parks and People Foundation — established by private citizens on behalf of the city — have tolerated and encouraged a different approach to the cities of the future.<sup>1</sup> This is their story and that of hundreds of other Baltimore city employees, private citizens, and neighborhood residents who want a better future for their city. It is a story of public service and outreach in the largest and best sense.

### Urban Resources Initiative: Human Ecosystem Revitalization

In 1989, the primary author, William J. Burch, was a member of a seventeen-member commission on research and resource management policy in the U. S. National Park System. Dr. Ralph Jones, newly appointed director of the Baltimore Recreation and Parks Department (BRPD), also was a member. Since Jones and Burch often shared the same minority opinions on the commission, they began to explore other issues. At that time, Burch was the director of a major forestry project in Nepal (The Institute of Forestry) and had worked on community-centered rural-development issues in several other Asian countries; Jones challenged Burch to apply these much-needed practices back home, in U. S. cities.

During a spring visit to the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Jones encouraged faculty and students to develop a program of mutual learning and service. Jones died that spring; however, the program was initiated.<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 1989, Yale graduate student Morgan Grove became the first BRPD intern; he was charged with searching for mutually beneficial activities. Soon after Grove's first summer in Baltimore, a local non-governmental organization, the Urban Resources Initiative, was formed under the auspices of the Parks and People Foundation in order to keep the program in tune with the city's needs, to seek funds, and to help develop linkages between the city's neighborhoods, their greatly stressed natural resource systems, and the BRPD, charged with managing those resource systems.

The task for the authors, our BRPD colleagues and Baltimore residents was complicated by the prevailing political climate. For nearly two decades the U. S. population has been told by some legislators and others in the federal government that it deserves tax cuts and better public services. However, the result is a self-confirming "proof" that government does not work: the rise in the federal deficit ensures the reduction of existing programs and limits any new initiatives. It is unlikely there will be any new "wars on

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poverty" or aid for urban centers in the near future; the votes are with the middle class and the suburbs, not the poor and the central cities. This means that real restructuring of government will be a necessity for many older cities, especially agencies like recreation and parks, which have no guaranteed external funds like agencies in the areas of health, police, and public works. Indeed, although recreation and parks departments provide many direct and indirect services and benefits, their budgets are usually among the first to be cut, suffer the most severe cuts, and, if good times return, are usually among the last in line for any increases.

For cities experiencing diminished resources like Baltimore, recreation and parks programs are the one agency that serves all

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age classes, all social classes, and all ethnic groups. Working mothers who want a positive environment for their children after school, older residents who want instruction in crafts, houses of worship that want youth groups to have nature-education guidance, young men who want a basketball court or a softball field for their league activity, and upper-class residents who wish to maintain an Olmsted aesthetic<sup>3</sup> all expect the recreation and parks program to serve their needs. The consequence is that outreach has not been something that "would be nice to do," it has been essential if any semblance of

service were to be maintained.

The challenge in Baltimore is how to develop outreach to 276 distinct neighborhood communities so that programs, functions, groups, and persons can find more efficient, effective, equitable, sustainable, and creative means for serving the human and natural resource needs of the city. Consequently, our notion of outreach includes connections to citizen groups and communities as well as other city agencies, other levels of government, and the corporate sector; exchanges between communities; and linkages between art, science and community action.

Our approach, in partnership with community members, is to focus on connected elements of the ecosystems we call Baltimore: street trees, vacant lots, open space areas, children at risk, learning opportunities, aesthetics, fragmented families, neighborhoods, greenways, institutional structures, and watersheds. These ecosystems are considered to be synonymous with the city's three major watersheds — the Herring Run, the Jones Falls, and the Gwynns Falls — and are to be planned and managed in conjunction with the different and distinct communities (neighborhoods) that are part of the system.

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Through our Urban Resources Initiative program, interns assume the role of natural-resource professionals and experts who facilitate rather than direct community-desired activities. Their training and education are critical to their work in urban areas, where they teach youth the tools and techniques of science and serve as mentors and role models. Interns also train recreation and parks personnel to become stewards of neighborhood resources, which in turn enhances their well being. For example, although BRPD staff mow the grass and pick up the trash, their training programs empower them with a sense of worth, professional pride, greater effectiveness, and a sense of their larger responsibility as stewards of the Chesapeake Bay.

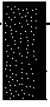
In order to judge the effectiveness of The Urban Resources Initiative program, our bottom line is the improvement in the social and biological ecology of the Chesapeake Bay. The Bay is the signature of the history and vitality of Baltimore's culture; the decline in the Bay's biomass productivity has been matched by the decline of Baltimore's economy. Therefore, our mantra has been that ecological restoration means human ecosystem revitalization. Activities to clean up vacant lots and convert them to gardens or "forests" also gives pride and learning opportunities to Project RAISE (Raising Ambitions Instills Self-Esteem) and KIDSGROW participants; the consequence of these efforts also reduces non-point source pollution entering the city's watersheds and ultimately the Bay.

Four basic ecosystem principles prevail in our efforts to link urban revitalization with environmental restoration: a learning-process approach in policy, planning and management; the development of social and biological linkages and networks; community participatory development; and the collection and exchange of information and knowledge.

#### Learning-Process Approach

The diffuse quality of information and interests in Baltimore's three watershed management districts brings us to our first ecosystem concept. As we embark upon a new and uncertain period of urban renewal (both social and ecological), we cannot operate as though we are experts who know all the symptoms and treatments for urban revitalization and environmental restoration. We operate with a learning-process approach where all the participants for a given issue are teachers and learners; we learn by doing,

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correcting our mistakes, and moving ahead. Although we do it consciously, this approach is similar to the way an ecosystem adjusts to internal and external disturbances and flows and cycles of critical resources such as energy, information, capital, materials, and people. In this learning approach we use the curiosity, ideas, ideals, and energy of our graduate and undergraduate student interns to help drive the system.

For instance, we and our colleagues developed the BRPD's first ever Strategic Plan for Action that learned from all levels and ranks of employees in the city's recreation and parks department, from community groups, and interested citizen groups. We also bring seminar groups from Yale to address specific issues that involve different levels of knowledge in the BRPD, other agencies, and various client groups. Similar strategies are used in the RAISE/Outward Bound programs with youths and the KIDSGROW programs. Finally, a training program for all staff members to prepare them to become stewards of the Baltimore communities and natural resources started as a top-down effort, but was quickly converted to a peer-taught effort.

### **Social and Biological Links and Networks**

A second ecosystem principle is the development of social and biological linkages and networks between system components. For instance, we assume that air pollution levels, stream-water quality, and the presence or absence of vegetation such as street trees affect the quality of neighborhood life. Therefore, to develop the Gwynns Falls greenway, which crossed some thirty neighborhoods, city agencies such as public works, police, health, recreation and parks had to coordinate and integrate their efforts if the greenway were to serve the neighborhoods. In addition, county, state, and federal agencies had different jurisdictions and responsibilities that had to be integrated if we were to have an effective, efficient, and sustainable system. Finally, other key links were sought from neighborhood and environmental groups that had a long-time interest and extensive body of knowledge that was essential to the management of the Gwynns Falls watershed. One such citizen group, Save Our Streams (SOS), has extensive volunteer groups to support and monitor stream quality and improvement in their neighborhoods. Any outreach effort had to connect these groups to one another: the Revitalizing Baltimore Program of the U. S. Forest Service has been exploring the means for facilitating these linkages. Perhaps the most critical element in making these linkages, however, came from the early involvement of an artist, Steffi Graham, whose magnificent photographs gave all the participants a sense of the vision, the need to help one another, and their basic connectedness. Her work was shown in the Rotunda of City Hall in 1993, and all the people who had worked in the various programs could see themselves and one another in the art and in the flesh. The artist, through her images, visually told us what we were or

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should be about and how well or poorly we were meeting those opportunities.

### **Community Participatory Development**

A third ecosystem principle is community participatory development, which some might summarize as planting trees to organize communities and organizing communities to plant trees. Here our interns work with neighborhood groups or similar agencies to train and work with youths to clean vacant lots and convert them to gardens, parks, or whatever use matches the wishes and designs of local people. These efforts cross generations and use trees, vegetables, and hard work as a means of learning, bonding, and gaining esteem for one's self and one's community. "Looking good" is a big start towards taking charge of our neighborhoods. In these efforts we are the facilitators, learners, teachers, nags, and cheerleaders. Real work skills are learned and direct benefits, culturally and economically, come to the communities. By 1995, some thirty neighborhoods had developed their own tree-steward groups and activities.

### **Collection and Exchange of Information and Knowledge**

The fourth ecosystem principle is the collection and exchange of information and knowledge, which is vital to a learning-process approach and was adopted from the outset. We believe that geographic information system (GIS) techniques are critical for linking the many data sets, disciplines, and involved groups. Thus, our first group of interns was able to use the expensive equipment of Daft-McCune-Walker, a private planning, architectural, and engineering firm, to map Baltimore's resources. An early product was a map of the city's recreation and park system. This permitted the citizens of Baltimore to know what resources were available, where they were located, and how they could be utilized. It was a form of outreach that provided knowledge and access to resources many citizens did not know were available. Our skills and contributions have expanded by working with Professor Tim Foresman and his "Baltimore-Washington Regional Collaboratory" which combines a variety of disciplines, organizations, and data sets to appreciate, understand, and assume responsibility for our human and natural resources in the Chesapeake-Potomac region. Graduate-student work has produced some forty manuals, working papers, plans, and papers, and one doctoral thesis that have been used for policy, planning, management, and training activities. Presently, a multi-disciplinary research team from the Institute of Ecosystem Studies, Baltimore-area universities and organizations, Yale University, and the U. S. Forest Service are developing research efforts that will permit a better understanding of the human and biophysical interactions of the region and how to better manage its major watersheds and associated neighborhoods. Citizen groups

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such as SOS and alumni of RAISE and KIDSGROW will work with scientific mentors on aspects of the research: that is, citizens will be producers as well as consumers of scientific information.

### Some Lessons Learned

Two of several possible outreach examples illustrate the lessons learned to date: the Strategic Plan for Action and the neighborhood tree steward program.

The Strategic Plan for Action was critical in that it prepared the BRPD for the necessary restructuring for outreach within and without the agency. It gave the agency a mission and direction that was pro-active rather than re-active and gave it some protection during inter-agency struggles for shrinking resources. Critical for implementation of the plan was a training manual and program which symbolized a new sense of professionalism among the employees and improved morale.

The Strategic Plan for Action helped the BRPD move toward a more participatory community-development approach. It also shifted the organization toward planning and management along the ecological lines of the city's three watershed units. Districts that combined recreation and parks services were identified in this manner while the introduction of geographic information systems gave a powerful technical means for combining a variety of efforts along watershed landscape scales. Here, recreation centers could not only provide active sports but also could expand to offer broader educational services within the parks. Redundant recreation centers, public open spaces, or parks could be identified and limited resources could be more efficiently allocated. It became a more efficient agency.

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It was hoped that the plan would incorporate the National Park Service's Fort McHenry unit and the State's Patapsco Park unit as more active partners. This did not happen. The notion of ecosystem units as management districts is still a radical notion. Indeed, almost none of the federal agencies who talk so much about ecosystem

management have "walked the walk" of such restructuring for the lands they manage and none of them have fully invested in an ecosystem management approach that truly includes people. To fully accomplish such a restructuring in Baltimore and other cities like it, there is the need for a full-time outreach person listening to, learning from, and working with recreation and parks department employees and community representatives. A faculty person from a distant institution may cheerlead, but implementation requires full-time attention to training, adapting, and cajoling. This means the



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way to save funds in the long run often requires spending more funds at the outset.

The training and organizational components of community tree-steward programs and other neighborhood stewardship programs provide for the eventual transfer of functions formerly handled by public-agency personnel to home-owners and neighborhood groups. However, in Baltimore, agency personnel were no longer available at the outset of the program. The city is providing residents with training to reap the desired services for the long run. Along the way, residents are gaining a sense of pride and responsibility for the health and well being of their community.

Working under the leadership of our BRPD colleagues, our Urban Resources Initiative interns helped organize neighborhood tree-steward groups and developed a training manual and training programs that culminated in awarding participants with a tree-steward certificate. As noted earlier, more than thirty neighborhoods have formed such groups. However, such efforts are not self-supporting. They require considerable and continuing support and contact by recreation and parks department specialists.

In 1996, the city arborist was criticized for spending too much time on community forestry and not enough time on removing dead and dangerous trees. While there is not enough money to service street trees in the short term, the tree-steward program — which would help relieve that pressure and provide the side benefits of neighborhood participation and unity over the long term — requires the continual attention of agency professionals. The long-run benefits are clear, but the short-run investment is missing.

## Conclusion

Outreach by government agencies has always been necessary, but in the urban future of the twenty-first century it will be critical for effective, efficient, adaptive, and sustainable public service.

Outreach — to be effective and sustainable — means that all parties involved must perceive a net mutual benefit: neighborhoods get help on things they wish accomplished; interns gain educational experience; public agencies gain energy and work accomplished; professors gain new research venues; and politicians get credit for making government work to meet public needs.

Outreach to other agencies, groups and communities will seldom involve everyone, but active participants are usually good representatives of the needs and interests of their communities.

Outreach at the initial stage will require significant investment; however, its savings and benefits are for the long run.

Outreach efforts that are sustainable will require the continued services of public professionals; however, a change in professional roles is needed from top-down director to facilitator, organizer, and coordinator.

Outreach is as much about finding opportunities and emerging resources where others see only problems and declining resources

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as it is about seeking to hold back inevitable demographic and economic trends.

Outreach is best carried by the idealism and energy of young professional interns.

Outreach requires top policy makers who are tolerant of the new, the unexpected, and a certain level of outrageous hope.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mayor Kurt Schmoke and his cabinet — particularly Marilyn Perrit, director of the Department of Recreation and Parks — and Ms. Alma Bell, Mr. Calvin Buikema, Ms. Cheryl Jordan and Mr. Gennady Schwartz of that department, as well as private citizens, Ms. Sally Michel, Ms. Laura Perry, Mr. Van Stewart, Ms. Jackie Carrera, Mr. Ted Weise and Ms. Lynne Durbin of the Parks and People Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> The tragic loss of Dr. Jones from a heart attack at the mid-point of negotiations simply drove Burch to ensure that a program was initiated.

<sup>3</sup> The Olmsted Aesthetic is a picturesque approach to landscape design of park areas with elements that include, for example, wide curvilinear or winding roads and pathways, ponds and streams, grass areas with trees overhead, and gazebos. Central Park in New York City, designed in 1858, is a good example. Frederick Law Olmsted used this design approach to create idyllic pictures of nature for park users. This design approach is relatively incompatible with other types of modern park use such as softball, baseball, football, mountain biking, and roller blading.

## About the authors

William Burch (Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is the Hixon Professor of Natural Resource Management in the School of Forestry and Environmental Studies Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University. He has held research and management positions with the U.S. Forest Service, USAID, U.S. National Park Service, and the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. He has conducted research on human ecology, planning and management of parks, biosphere reserves, and ecotourist regions in rural and urban areas in Asia, South America, and Europe as well as North America. He has also conducted research in community/social forestry systems and institutional development including technical training and higher-education curriculum development, and developing a unified ecosystem-management approach. He has worked in countries including Bangladesh, Thailand, Bhutan, China, Japan, Nepal, and the People's Republic of China.

Morgan Grove (Ph.D., Yale University) joined the U.S. Forest Service in 1996 as a research forester in both Burlington, Vt., working on a computer-based set of decision-support tools for forest management, and Durham, N.H., working on the Global Change program to assess the effects of forest on nitrogen cycling in the Chesapeake Bay. His research interests include human ecosystem and landscape studies of forested areas. Grove helped to develop The Urban Resources Initiative Program in Baltimore in 1989. From 1989 to the present, he has worked on a variety of research and management activities in the Baltimore metropolitan region.