

READING THE LANDSCAPE

A REFLECTION ON METHOD

**Lindsay Campbell, Erika Svendsen,
Nancy Falxa-Raymond, and Gillian Baine**

**USDA FOREST SERVICE, NORTHERN RESEARCH STATION,
NYC URBAN FIELD STATION**

Who uses the parks, natural areas, and waterfronts of the Jamaica Bay region, how do they use them, and why? We are systematically searching the terrain of urban green spaces for signs of human use and stewardship in order to answer this question.

Social scientists and ecologists from the US Forest Service are collaborating with the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation and the Natural Areas Conservancy in



a Social Assessment of 4500 acres of public green space. Following structured observational protocols, we sweep through park interiors and trace park edges. We divide the interiors into zones to help us move through space and assign observations to different sectors of parks—forests, playgrounds, beaches, and fields. We walk the perimeter to understand the interface between the park and the neighborhood.



Working in pairs, we count and categorize human activities that we observe. We track people engaging in sports, nature recreation, resting, walking, working. We consider sociability—whether people are alone, with dogs, in pairs, small groups, or large groups. To take into account temporal variations in use, we visit each site three times: on a weekday, an evening, and a weekend.



EDGE OBSERVATION: ☐ Park Side ☐ Neighborhood Side

Team Name: <i>NFL + LKC</i>	Date (MM/DD/YYYY): <i>8/13/13</i>	Start Time: <i>9:00</i>	Stop Time: <i>12:30</i>	First Photo #: <i>1136</i>
Location ID: <i>Zone A</i>	Starting Intersection: <i>Plumb Beach</i>	Weather Temperature: <i>Sunny 80°</i>	Last Photo #: <i>1159</i>	
DIRECT HUMAN OBSERVATION				
	# Kids (<18)	# Adults (18-65)	# Seniors (>65)	
Sports (soccer, tennis, cricket, baseball, volleyball, football, Frisbee, playground use, etc.)				
Jogging / Running		<i>MTT</i>		
Nature recreation (birding, launching or landing boat, fishing, etc.)				
Bicycling	<i>MTT MTT</i>	<i>MTT MTT MTT MTT MTT MTT MTT MTT MTT MTT MTT</i>	<i>MTT</i>	
Walking / Dog Walking	<i>MTT</i>	<i>MTT MTT MTT MTT</i>	<i>MTT</i>	
Socializing in Place (people talking, barbecuing, party, in groups)				
Educational Group / Tour (remember primary purpose, note the activity - count each individual)				
Working (parks maintenance, vendor, utility, repair, building, re-building)		<i>1</i>		
Plant collection / Foraging / Gathering				
Personal Property Maintenance (home repair/painting, washing car, car/bike maintenance,)		<i>1</i>		
Stewardship (gardening, tree care, weeding, trash removal, watering, volunteers in parks)				
Sitting / Resting / Standing / Waiting / Keeping Watch (alone, not socializing)		<i>MTT</i>	<i>1</i>	
Other Activity (homeless person sleeping, musician on street)				
Encounter with Resident: <i>positive</i> (including in cars and in homes)				
Encounter with Resident: <i>negative</i> (including in cars and in homes)				
SOCIAL OBSERVATION				
# of pairs	<i>MTT MTT MTT</i>			
# of small groups (3-10)	<i>MTT</i>			
# of large groups (10+)				
# of dogs	<i>MTT MTT</i>			
Other Field Notes: <i>Bike path not shaded in afternoon but well used by bikers and dog walkers. Many trails leading south from bike path through shrubs/grass to beach. Some debris on beach from Sandy. Seniors resting on beach. Lots of litter, dumping.</i>				

Yet still, we know that we will miss activities and practices that occur in different time frames and over longer time horizons. We will miss the birders at dawn, or the slow erosion of grass under feet. So we look for traces, for signs of human use, for the imprint that park users leave on the landscape. We note desire lines and well-worn trails. We document counter-narratives in the form of graffiti, hand-made signs, and murals. We note guerilla gardens, impromptu seating, temporary shelters, and acts of defiance such as dumping and vandalism. All of these signs are evidence that humans are ecosystem engineers, that our parks are co-created, by the Parks Department, of course, but also by the broader public.



And we talk to people. Through randomized selection in the field, we interview more than 600 adult park users about their activities in the park that day and about their engagement with the site over time. We learn of people's deep attachment to and love for these places. Many parks are crucial resources that serve people's daily needs for beauty, refuge, solace, sustenance, socialization, movement, stillness. They are platforms for work and play and they provide materials that can be transformed through creative acts of digging, assembly, and re-purposing.

Our hunt has brought us to corners of the city that were previously unknown to us, even as avid cyclists, park lovers, beach goers, and urban explorers. Sites that were once featureless green blobs on map come alive. Surprises hide behind seemingly uninspiring names like "North Channel Parking Lot." We have rich encounters with people seine fishing, engaging in Hindu rituals, playing in the sand, and boating.

At the end of each site visit, we gather our clipboards and cameras, and we raise up our heads to talk, debrief, and reflect, synthesizing our perceptions and felt experiences into narrative field notes. We produce park profiles, reports, photo databases,

and articles that capture our understanding of these sites. Meanwhile, we find that we, ourselves, are transformed. We have a new way of seeing, of reading the landscape. And through this, we have a new appreciation of and connection with these grounds.

