

UK public parks face perilous future

By Dennis Moore
9 January 2016

There are approximately 27,000 public parks in the UK covering a third of a million acres, a size nearly that of Greater London.

The majority of parks are owned and maintained by local authorities. They are valued public assets, providing leisure and recreational spaces. An estimated 2.6 billion visits are made to public parks each year, with 600 million made by those with children under the age of 16. Parks remain one of the few places where people can meet up and socialise for free.

This intrinsic part of the social fabric of cities and towns is under serious threat.

In June 2015, a number of London's local authorities issued a warning that if government cuts continue, the capital's boroughs will not be able to prevent a "slide towards privately run parks" by the end of the decade. Due to local authority budget cuts, London's boroughs have been forced to reduce the city's spending on open spaces by 18 percent in the past four years.

A report published in 2014 by the Heritage Lottery Fund into the state of UK public parks found that though there had been something of a renaissance in public parks, with increased attendance figures, this is fast coming to an end.

The report found that 86 percent of park managers saw their revenues cut in the previous three years, with the trend set to continue. Some 45 percent of local authorities are considering selling parks and green spaces, or transferring their management. Some 81 percent of council parks departments, having lost skilled management staff since 2010, with 77 percent losing frontline staff.

At present there have been no major selloffs of public spaces for fear of the possible public outcry, yet there has been an encroachment into selling off some public park space for development.

Parks are not a statutory service and local authorities have no legal obligation to fund them.

In Liverpool, there is a campaign to prevent the Labour Party mayor selling off Sefton Park Meadows. The mayor has indicated that a private developer can come in and build 30 houses on the land. Sefton Park Meadows is an 11 acre site, adjoining Sefton Park, and considered an area of natural beauty that should be kept under local authority control.

In 2014, Battersea Park in South London turned over its adventure playground to a private company, Go Ape. The site had become dilapidated, but was still used by local children. When its privatisation was mooted, local residents voiced their anger. People wishing to use the new facility will have to pay an estimated £25 a session whereas previously it was free.

At the Derby Arboretum the impact of years of cuts are evident, with public lavatories out of order, litter left under trees, and many gates locked. In 2011, there were 33 full-time rangers, now there are just 13.

Towneley Park in Burnley in the north-west of England has converted a quarter of its 400 acre park to wildflower meadows. The move away from formal green spaces including mown lawns and flower bed areas towards wildflower meadows and natural planting has not simply been carried out for environmental reasons. It is also much cheaper. For every acre they don't have to mow each year, the council saves £1,000. Simon Goff, head of green spaces in Burnley, said they had lost 50 percent of staff—down from 90 to 45.

To save money they are testing out a number of ideas, including asking local farmers to mow the grassed areas and keeping the hay as payment, and growing the herb borage that produces the commercially-viable Starflower oil.

The development of public parks and open spaces in the UK was a social gain for many workers in the burgeoning industrial areas of Victorian Britain. They had to live and work in squalid dirty conditions, with

very little access to clean, green open spaces. The first parks were an oasis, where workers could breathe fresh air, away from the smog and dirt, enjoy nature, look at decorative gardens—often laid out with ornate water features and specimen trees.

The first public park was built in 1840 in the Midlands city of Derby, on an 11-acre site donated by Joseph Strutt, whose family had made a fortune from textil manufacturing. John Claudius Loudon, a leading botanist and landscape gardener, was given the task of designing a haven amid the smog of the industrial town.

This was later to become the Derby Arboretum and was used as a model on which many of Britain’s public parks were to be built.

The significance of the park was that for two days a week it was free for the public to enter. There had been other green spaces, such as village commons, parks and leisure gardens, but people had to pay an entrance fee.

The Derby Arboretum had 1,000 species of trees and shrubs, created specifically for the public to educate themselves in botany, and develop an appreciation of nature. The park was an immediate success, with thousands visiting every Sunday and Wednesday.

This led to similar parks being built across the UK, including Victoria Park in Hackney, London—designed with the intention of alleviating terrible health problems among workers, particularly dockers—to Birkenhead Park in the Wirral, Liverpool, which opened in 1847 and was to be a model for New York’s Central Park.

Professor Paul Elliot, a specialist in the history of parks, told the *Daily Telegraph*, “If a library closes it is immediately obvious. But if you gradually cut back a park’s funding, it’s harder to notice. Grass is mown less frequently, trees start to die. It’s incremental.”

The erosion of the right to access public parks is an international phenomena. In February 2014, Detroit’s 985-acre Belle Isle Park—the largest island public park in America—was taken over by the Michigan state government under a 30-year lease. This was an initial step toward the restriction of public access and privatisation of park. In preparation for its selloff, the Department of Natural Resources has begun charging an \$11 admission annual fee, after generations of Detroiters visited the park for free.

It is not just local public parks that are under threat.

Nothing is safe from the grasp of private corporations and their profiteering. Just before Christmas, the British parliament voted to allow fracking under all England’s 10 national parks, five areas of Outstanding National Beauty, the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads and World Heritage Sites. This opened up almost 7 percent of the UK’s landmass to the fracking corporations.

This follows the cut by up to 40 percent in real terms during the past five years of the budgets of national park authorities.

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