

The Urban Wilderness Park: An Oxymoron?¹

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Abstract: The concept of wilderness in an urban context is explored by using Friedrich Wilderness Park in San Antonio, Texas, as an example. The issue of how natural resources protection and environmental education can be accomplished in spite of inadequate public funding is addressed.

In her will conveying a tract of undeveloped land to the city of San Antonio in 1971, Norma Friedrich Ward specified that "... insofar as possible, the natural vegetation and native trees and shrubs be protected, and that native birds and wildlife be protected and encouraged to use the park as a sanctuary." These stipulations provide the definition of "wilderness" as it applies to the park today.

Commonly known as Friedrich Wilderness Park, the park is comprised of 232 acres of wooded hills and drainages, in a relatively natural condition. It is the most environmentally sensitive land in the inventory of the city's Department of Parks and Recreation and is the only city park land on which traditional recreational development is restricted. It provides critical habitat for two endangered bird species and numerous locally rare plant and animal species. It accommodates ecological research, environmental education, primitive hiking, and other passive recreational opportunities.

When it first became city property, the park was located several miles north of the San Antonio metropolitan boundary within a rural landscape. At that time, because of its relatively low visibility and public use, the lack of perceived threats to its ecosystem, the legal restrictions on its development, and a chronically low Departmental budget for parks, the most reasonable course for the city was to fence it off and construct a primitive trail system to provide some minor amenities for public day use, and essentially leave it alone. Thus, the designation of the park as a wilderness seemed reasonable even by the United States legal definition as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is himself a visitor who does not remain."

Unfortunately however, this park is located in the most rapidly urbanizing region of central Texas, at the edge of the Nation's tenth largest city, along a major growth corridor, within a half mile of a major interstate highway. In the past 10 years, land speculation in this area has reached epidemic proportions. A major university, world-class theme park, numerous thoroughfare expansions and all the typical urban

residential and commercial development associated with them is resulting in an explosive conversion of the landscape, and the amoeboid boundary of the city has reached the park. A large upscale subdivision is located near the park's south boundary, a destination resort hotel and residential complex is under construction adjacent to the park on the north and west, and commercial development is anticipated along the park's east side.

As the park becomes a wild island in an urban sea, the natural community that it was intended to preserve and the species for which it provides sanctuary have become increasingly 'trammelled' by man. Noise, lights, pollution, domestic and introduced species, vandalism and trespass are now eroding the park's wildness. In addition to this activity around the park, public visitation to the park has grown from several hundred annual visitors in the 1970's to more than 78,000 last year, and the demand for the passive recreational opportunities the park offers has increased almost exponentially.

This scenario has been repeated in urbanizing areas throughout the country, and may be painfully familiar to many. The loss of the rural environmental context of nature parks such as Friedrich will result in permanent alterations of natural ecosystems and a severe compromise of the traditional wilderness character. But does this loss mean that the designation "wilderness" is no longer appropriate?

"Relative" Wilderness

Fortunately, wilderness is a relative concept, and the less rigid the perspectives of an urban public about wilderness, the greater the importance of urban nature parks and the critical role of such parks in addressing wilderness preservation and conservation objectives at a different scale.

Although a 232-acre patch of undeveloped land in an otherwise urban matrix cannot provide sanctuary to all the native plants and animals that once called it home, it can continue to provide a close approximation of a wilderness experience for many urban dwellers. Therefore, the "relative" wilderness of such nature parks can be regarded as no less real than if it were "true" wilderness in the biological sense. The most important role for Friedrich Park in the future is not its ability to preserve endangered species or natural ecosystems, but rather its ability to educate an urban public about the wonder and fragility of the natural world...using itself as the model.

Parks as Education Centers

Although we can acknowledge the changing role and growing value of a park like Friedrich, providing the necessary

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methods to ensure that the park fulfills its new mandates is not an easy task. The city of San Antonio, like many other communities, lacks experience with parks as education centers. Given the severe social problems facing most cities today, this type of park is often perceived as merely undeveloped, under-utilized, low maintenance land of little importance. Therefore, quite reasonably, most nature centers and low-impact recreation parks receive the lowest funding priority within parks department budgets, and typically parks departments receive the lowest budgetary allocations of a city's major departments. Because of the increasing urban impacts, growing public use, and continually declining public dollars, how can parks like Friedrich hope to preserve any remnant of wilderness character and, at the same time, begin to realize their educational potential?

Is the situation hopeless? No! Of course not. Typically, as in the case of Friedrich Park, once certain concerned segments of the general public come to understand both the tremendous significance of the urban natural area and the limitations of the city's budget, they are often galvanized into action. In the early 1970's, volunteers from the local Sierra Club chapter helped the city define and construct an initial trail system. In the mid 1980's, the local chapter of the National Audubon Society adopted the park as part of its conservation and education outreach program and organized service outings, educational programs, and environmental research there. At various times, scouting groups and other service organizations have provided manpower and funds for projects that could not have been accomplished without their help.

During the past 10 years, volunteers have contributed more than 1,500 hours of research, over 2,800 hours of public education, more than 2,100 hours of physical labor, and more than 1,500 hours of planning, fundraising and public relations. Billed at \$20.00/hour these efforts have effectively augmented the city Parks Department's meager budget by approximately \$160,000.00.

Friends of Friedrich Wilderness Park

In 1990 a private volunteer support group, the Friends of Friedrich Wilderness Park (FOF), was formally incorporated. FOF's mission is to work cooperatively with the city to promote ecosystem conservation and environmentally sensitive park management, and to increase public understanding and appreciation of the natural environment through the development of educational and scientific programs at the park.

FOF now sponsors and coordinates a broad range of environmental education programs, organizes fundraising and public relations campaigns, lobbies decision-makers on behalf of the park, contributes time and expertise to park planning and maintenance, and works with the city to address a variety of resource management issues. In cooperation with local academic institutions, audubon groups and the park's naturalist, FOF supervises a number of nationally significant science and research projects. FOF has received support from the San Antonio Junior League to develop and implement a first-rate docent training program, and with the help of local scout troops and service organizations and the park naturalist, FOF coordinates a variety of stewardship and maintenance projects. In addition, in its short life, FOF has successfully raised more than \$20,000.00 in grants, and public and private donations.

FOF has recently founded the Norma Friedrich Ward Center for Education and Research, which currently operates out of the park's only building—a horse stable and maintenance garage. The Center umbrellas the usual activities of FOF and has added several ambitious initiatives including the acquisition of additional land, development of a park master plan, and the construction of a "real" headquarters and nature center. Most recently, FOF has successfully lobbied the mayor and city council to earmark \$300,000.00 of an impending bond package for the nature center development.

Preserving the Park and the Wilderness

This type of two-pronged approach is the key to cultivating an appreciation of wilderness in the larger context: it simultaneously preserves the park's natural community and wilderness quality so that the public has an opportunity to personally experience a sense of the wild, while also reinforcing and expanding the wilderness experience with strong environmental education programs.

Growing evidence shows that the more separated a person becomes from the natural world, the less likely he/she will value and conserve it. Wilderness approximations such as those preserved at Friedrich Wilderness Park may provide a growing urban population with the only tangible connection between their intensely developed environment and the rural or natural environment that supports it. This critical connection is one on which the future of all wilderness may ultimately depend.