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Why London is being turned into the world's first national park city



Greenwich Park CREDIT: GETTY

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By **Laura Latham**

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Think of Britain's national parks and you probably imagine the sweeping landscape of Dartmoor and the majesty of the Lake District. You almost certainly won't think of Greater London. But this month sees the first step to making the capital the world's first National Park City.

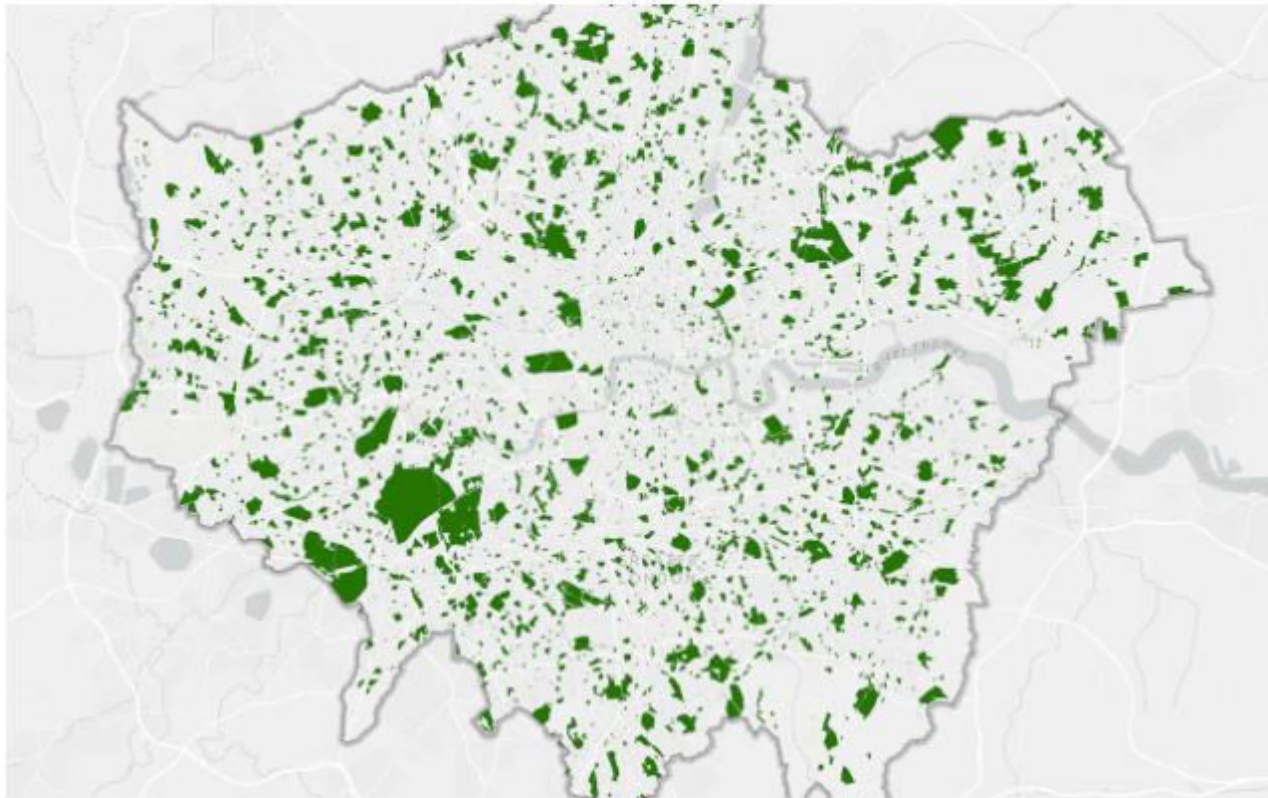
The concept may seem strange, but the aim is to highlight the importance of green space in the capital in order to increase and protect it. According to mapping company Esri, Greater London's public green space covers 16.8 per cent of the city.

Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, has set a goal of turning the capital 50 per cent green by 2050 (including private areas such as back gardens). He also plans to increase tree canopy cover in the capital by 10 per cent during that period.

"Our job is to help raise the profile of the work being done to protect and preserve green areas," says Paul de Zylva, chair of the National Park City Foundation. "We wondered what the conversation would be like if we - applied the same principles of national parks to London."

LANDMARK
PINNACLE

The capital's National Park City status will be confirmed at a ceremony on Monday, but the initiative kicks off on 20 July. The nine-day festival is designed to draw attention to the breadth of natural areas and conservation groups across London. There will be a range of events, including theatre, talks, workshops, competitions and nature trails. Rooftop gardens in public and private buildings, from Ikea in Greenwich to the Ham Yard Hotel in Soho, will be opened up to the public.



The public green spaces in London make up 16 per cent of land, according to Esri CREDIT: ESRI UK

De Zylva, who is also a campaigner for the charity Friends of the Earth, points out that Greater London has a surprising amount of green space. “It’s a city with 3,000 parks, 142 local nature reserves, 8.3 million trees, 3.8 million private gardens and even 200 farms,” he says. “We look after our built heritage, but we need to understand our natural heritage, too.”

The mayor’s planning bible, the London Plan, states that although London has relatively high levels of green space, it’s in danger of losing it to new development, such as housing, schools, industrial premises and transport infrastructure. Developers are now encouraged by planners to factor in green space wherever possible, in the form of parks and gardens, but also on roofs, terraces and balconies. The London Plan also encourages a switch from what it calls “grey”, or traditional, infrastructure and transport options, to greener alternatives.

As well as engaging with local authorities and the London Assembly, the National Park City Foundation is working with architects and developers with the aim of preserving as much of the natural environment as possible. “We’re inefficient in how we use land; there needs to be a debate about development,” says de Zylva, who claims many developers only pay lip service to the greening of a site with “a patch of grass and a few trees stuck in concrete”.



Berkeley's Kidbrooke Village in south-east London CREDIT: SIMON WINSON

Recent research from housebuilder Barratt reveals that many Londoners also believe developers are failing to deliver on green space, and rate natural assets, such as parks and lakes, above built ones. The survey found that 82 per cent of respondents said access to green space was a significant factor when purchasing a home.

Some developers are already on board with the idea of the National Park City, including Quintain, which is behind much of the regeneration around London's Wembley Stadium. "Creating... landscapes for schemes is a vitally important part of the environment in London," says Julian Tollast, Quintain's head of masterplanning, who is also a trustee of the National Park City Foundation. "It isn't incompatible with the need to build houses."

Wembley Park is changing from a heavily urban, concrete landscape into somewhere with a seven-acre park, roof gardens and terraces alongside 8,000 new properties. An avenue of trees has been planted after consultation with Kew Gardens to find the right species for the site, and several pockets of land have been left to rewild. "Around a quarter of the 85 acres will be public open space," says Tollast.

He points to other developments that have incorporated swathes of nature, such as Berkeley's Kidbrooke Village in south-east London, which added 86 acres of parkland to the area.

Even the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf have got more green: thanks to tree-planting initiatives and efforts to add plants, it has one of the highest concentrations of green roofs in the country. Contributing to the greening of Canary Wharf's towers is Chalgrave Properties' Landmark Pinnacle, the tallest residential tower in Europe. That makes its roof terrace, on the 75th floor, the highest garden in town. It is one of two garden spaces that span the width of the building.

"Gardens add genuine value to the community," says Rami Atallah, Chalgrave's project coordinator. He says high-rises are often not designed in a way that naturally fosters community, but gardens help to create a sense of neighbourhood. "We don't want to lose the human aspect. The gardens here are good for the well-being of residents."



Tipi's Emerald Gardens in Wembley CREDIT: KHALED KASSEM

London may be the first National Park City, but it won't be the last. Other cities now aiming for the same status include Glasgow and Birmingham, - Galway in Ireland, the Austrian city of Salzburg, and Adelaide in Australia. The foundation has also had interest from cities in Asia and South America.

De Zylva is hoping this month's festival will raise awareness and appreciation of London's green spaces and the organisations that are working to promote and protect them. "There's a debate to be had about how we use land and water, support wildlife and accessible green space. What if London was greener, healthier, wilder?"

National Park City Festival runs from July 20-28; nationalparkcity.london