



**New York City Council Parks & Recreation Committee  
Hearing on Natural Areas Funding  
December 16, 2014**

Good morning. Thanks for the chance to salute our 10000-acre natural-areas portfolio. This is a public servant who works all year, around the clock, and never asks for a bonus –but you shouldn't assume that means it has no need for more support. It needs a higher, sustained level of skilled maintenance to keep doing its irreplaceable work.

Natural areas comprise roughly a third of parkland, serving three key citywide goals. They provide infrastructure, ecosystem management and open space of a kind many New Yorkers would never otherwise know. Let's review these jobs and the case for robustly funding them.

Natural areas are infrastructure, harder than bridges and harder to replicate than data networks. Their marshes drink stormwater, their forests filter air and their species help define the estuary that makes New York so attractive to many living things- birds, hipsters, retirees.

At a time when any hurricane season might hobble our business district or cut off our highways, common sense demands that we maintain these places with professional crews. So does fiscal management, in light of the more than \$40 million of capital that the city has provided to natural areas since around 2004.

These thriving ecosystems need maintenance just as basketball courts or playgrounds do, but their sensitive ecology does best under the care of trained crews. As a former park administrator I salute the NRG for managing more than 5000 volunteers this year, but we also know volunteers can make light work of basic tasks. They do beautifully at the edges, but only pros can set strategic and scientific direction for our stewardship.

We can ill afford to let money for these crews dwindle by 2017, right when our hurricane-season luck may run out again. The Parks Department has worked creatively to fund managers and crews from limited sources, but we should face up to the natural areas' perpetual need for support.

The Natural Areas Conservancy, let's remember, differs from other conservancies in scope and time horizon. It roves the city, sending professionals to parks that are not otherwise going to get funding for study or for fine-tuning. And it manages places not just to earn loyal users this year but to sustain citizens well into the future. With just a little more support, they could do this with fuller data and better tracking of best practices.

Natural areas are our legacy. Ed Toth keeps stock of 600 species in the Native Plant Center on Staten Island. This bank literally hedges us against the wildest risk inherent in climate change, which is the chance that we will not know how to "reboot" our ecology after tampering with it so much.

Staff for the Native Plant Center represents a modest insurance policy – and, with a \$6 million challenge grant in the offing for forest restoration, more support to NAC seems like a cheap down payment.

So does giving up on the connections the natural areas open for kids and seniors. Prospect Park holds a special place in my heart, but only holds space for limited numbers in its wild areas. The same goes for Central Park. The hardworking 10000 acres here, with proper care, can thrive as many New Yorkers' portal to nature and as home for a range of life whose uses and services we overlook at our peril. Thanks.

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