

Urban growth vs. nature in Portland

Can cities and nature coexist in the same space?

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Nature is a part of Portland. The city has one of the densest urban canopies in the country. Nearly every neighborhood has at least one park. People can hit the trails and see wildlife after a 30-minute MAX or bike ride to Tryon Creek, Forest Park, Powell Butte or Oaks Bottom.

The Audubon Society of Portland has a robust backyard habitat program that encourages residents to plant native plants and remove invasive species. Some trees in people's backyards or along many of Portland's tree-lined streets are more than 100 years old.

Cutting down trees, as well as demolishing craftsman-style homes to make way for new development, has become a common sight in Portland — due to the city's population boom. It is a trend that many would have thought unimaginable a few years ago. It has many residents up in arms as they try to stop some developments in their neighborhood and pursue policy changes at the city level ("Tree loss spurs Portland residents to action," Street Roots, Aug. 13, 2015).

Can cities and nature coexist in the same space? People like Mike Houck think cities need nature to be livable.

Mike Houck is the founder of the Urban Greenspaces Institute, which is run out of Portland State University's geography department. The institute's mission is to advocate for public policy that integrates greenspaces — parks, trail systems and greenways — with cities in the Portland-Vancouver metro area.

Houck has served on numerous boards and committees, including the city's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability, and is a nationally recognized authority on integrating nature with urban environments. He spoke with Street Roots about preserving Portland's access to nature, what he calls the "natural green environment."

Amanda Waldroupe: *Development in Portland over the last couple years has a lot of people wondering if nature can coexist with highly developed, urban areas. What do you think?*

Mike Houck: That's the conundrum. I was shocked to learn that there is no tree preservation requirement at all in the new tree code. There's a mitigation requirement. We have a goal to have a 33 percent urban forest canopy. What is it now? Twenty-seven percent, I think. I'm an advocate for infill development. I can't say I'm an advocate of tearing down a smaller house and cutting down trees and building a big mansion.

A.W.: *What value is there to living around greenery and a natural environment?*

M.H.: People's physiology changes when they're around something that has green in it. Blood pressure is lower, our sense of well-being is increased. People just feel more at ease and they feel better. It's a human, physical thing for both mental and physical health. There's a lot of research that is coming out that is becoming a lot more credible and science-based.

You take a walk around Portland on, say, Tillamook Street, versus 82nd during the summer and it's 95 degrees out. Trees are incredibly important just for quality of life and for combating urban heat island effect (an increase in temperatures due to absorption of heat into concrete and asphalt). The city of Portland has mapped the entire city in terms of where the worst urban heat island effect will be, due to climate change. Those are the areas that may be most in need of increasing the urban forest canopy. It is a huge issue from a human health perspective. You go into Portland and you go into the well canopied neighborhoods, and it's a totally different feeling from being someplace like 82nd.

A.W.: *How does it feel?*

M.H.: It's hard to describe. It's a gestalt. It's beauty. We put too little value in that.

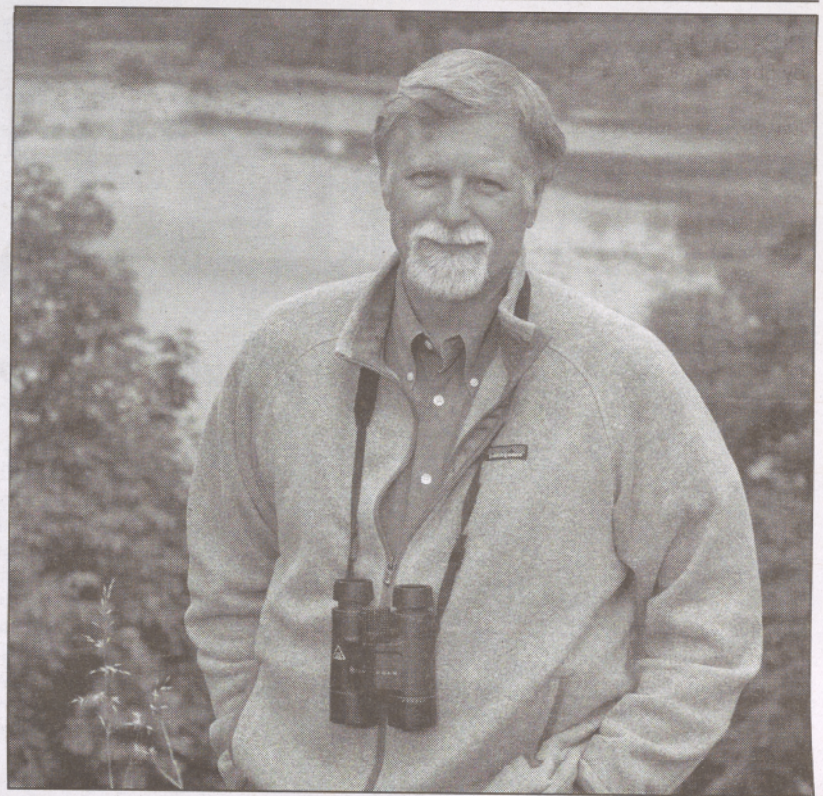
A.W.: *Why do you say that?*

M.H.: Everything has to be monetized. We have to quantify everything. My ecology professor once said that ecology is the painful elucidation of the obvious. But that's not good enough, especially if you're trying to implement public policy. There is the whole concept of ecosystem services, that the ecosystem provides us with services: clean water, clean air, better health. There is a long-standing and ongoing effort to monetize that. That tree is worth \$4,233 in property value, \$215 in air quality, \$782 contribution to combating urban heat island. It's just another in a long list of rationales for increasing the urban forest canopy. Above and beyond the fact that the people in the neighborhood want these trees, there's economic reasons for that as well.

We have Forest Park. We have Powell Butte. We have Oaks Bottom. The big chunks are out there. That's a battle we've fought and mostly won. The big challenge, in my mind, is that we need to do a better job of integrating the built natural environment at the streetscape, at the building scale. That's the challenge now.

A.W.: *Why do you think that's the biggest challenge?*

M.H.: We haven't gotten to the tipping point yet, in my mind. There's still not an across-the-board recognition among policy makers and politicians about the value of



Mike Houck, founder of the Urban Greenspaces Institute

the smaller stuff like the bioswale, the tree canopy, eco-roofs and what role they play in creating a more livable environment, ecologically and for human health.

A.W.: *There are some who argue that, because Portland's population will continue growing quite rapidly for the next couple decades, Portland should become more dense, at the sacrifice of the urban canopy and other parts of the city's natural amenities. What do you think of that?*

M.H.: It's bullshit. If what they mean by that is we wipe out all the green in the city in order to densify, I don't agree with that. It's the same argument people made 20 years ago with protecting areas like Oaks Bottom — that there was no place for nature in the city, and that the purpose of the Urban Growth Boundary is to protect nature "out there." Most elected officials and planners and other people in authority had this bizarre notion that it was enough to protect nature outside of the Urban Growth Boundary and let everything go to hell on the inside. The Urban Growth Boundary became such an icon, an end rather than a tool. The idea holding the Urban Growth Boundary (at its current boundaries) at any cost is crazy. We need nature. People want access to parks and trails where they live. We can have a combination.

A.W.: *Do you think the Urban Growth Boundary should be expanded to accommodate for current development?*

M.H.: Let me rephrase that question. If, in order to protect quality of life, ecological integrity inside the Urban Growth Boundary, we need to expand it, yeah, absolutely. It is not acceptable to trash everything inside the Urban Growth Boundary to hold the boundary.

A.W.: *How do you think we densify and preserve the city's natural environment?*

M.H.: The Bureau of Planning and Sustainability has concluded through the Comprehensive Plan process that we can accommodate that population quite easily in the land we already have by being more efficient. There are a lot of techniques that don't require trees to be cut down, like building (accessible dwelling units) and smaller-scale apartment units. We know we're going to have much more multi-family housing. We don't have the classic 1940s mom, dad, two kids family size. That doesn't exist any more. We need the right kind of codes and zoning that result in better protections. That doesn't exist right now. We need to be much more stringent in regard to what we're requiring.

A.W.: *How do you do both?*

M.H.: You do a better job of integrating the built and natural environment. You have more green walls, eco-roofs, the fine-scale stuff needs to be part of how we develop. Because you happen to have higher density multi-family development does not mean you can't have the green with that. That's a matter of how we require developers to develop. It's not like we have to sacrifice everything to achieve that objective. We can do both.

A.W.: *You're talking about things like bioswales and eco-roofs — things that are green and ecologically friendly, but that are artificial. They're not as natural as, say, trees. Do you think cities are destined have more artificial greenery — what you call "built green infrastructure," and that it is not possible for cities, especially dense ones, to have nature in them?*

M.H.: You can have a combination. We need both the natural and built green infrastructure. Look at the Pearl. Tanner

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